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Abstract

Using the case study model, the effects of an American tragedy on the communications planning and overall crisis mindset of a Canadian university are examined. The goal of this case study was to assess how Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario was impacted by the events that unfolded at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia, where a lone gunman shot and killed 32 students and staff before taking his own life. Four administrative leaders at Trent were interviewed and existing crisis planning documents were analyzed. The results revealed that a parallel crisis can have a substantial impact on an organization's crisis mindset in the months immediately following the event. The effect of Virginia Tech on Trent resulted in: new lessons learned by senior administrative staff; a heightened awareness on the campus of risk factors; and enhancement of the university's crisis plan.

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Background

The violent tragedy that beset Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) on April 17, 2007, during which 32 people were killed in a shooting rampage by a mentally unstable student, has underscored how critically important it is for universities to have well-developed crisis communication plans at the ready. Despite the unprecedented severity of the campus killing spree, several criticisms were levelled against Virginia Tech following the tragedy. Those criticisms pointed to the university's inadequate handling of earlier warning signs and poor initial communication response as the crisis unfolded (Barnett, 2007; McKelway, 2007). These post-event analyses are providing other universities with many new lessons, while reinforcing existing strategies on the best way to avoid crisis situations and handle them should they arise. Three dominant crisis communications issues were raised in the media and public relations literature in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech incident:

1. The need for quick, aggressive communication when the crisis hit (Barnett, 2007);
2. Paying closer attention to warning signs and taking definitive action when individuals exhibit signs of mental instability (McKelway, 2007); and,
3. Implementing better threat assessment measures to identify and care for troubled individuals whose behaviour could lead to violence (Lenckus, 2007).

Consequently, many educational institutions across North America are refocusing their efforts on revising and adapting their crisis communications plans in an attempt to prevent similar crises from happening on their own campuses. Trent University, based in Peterborough, Ontario, is no exception. In the weeks since the Virginia Tech tragedy, Trent thoroughly reviewed and updated its crisis communications plan and explored new methods of engaging its priority publics in the identification and communication of warning signs.

Drawing out the lessons learned after an organization has experienced a crisis is considered the fifth and final stage of a crisis. Fearn-Banks (2001) describes this as the process of "evaluating the crisis and determining what is lost and what is gained (if anything) and how to turn the crisis into a prodrome for the future" (480). In fact, being "prevention-oriented" is considered by many scholars to be the fundamental premise of effective crisis management (Olaniran and Williams, 2001).

Applying new insights gained from past crises is a fundamental aspect of the anticipatory model of crisis management. Olaniran and Williams (2001) stated that this model “suggests the possibility that crises could be held in check through an understanding of preconditions and instituting action plans to counteract the precondition effects” (489). The potential benefits of extending this model to the university sector are significant; new communication and security programs are put into practice to avoid potential crises on campuses, and the impact of a crisis may be mitigated should it occur. Marra (1998) emphasized that public relations practice has an important role to play in this anticipatory model as its crisis function shifts “from techniques to larger, managerial and organizational issues” (473). Crisis communications theory posits that organizations will suffer less damage and recover more quickly from crises if they implement what several researchers have identified as best practices (Fearn-Banks, 2001). Fearn-Banks (2001) identified 11 best crisis communication practices that are found amongst organizations defined as excellent according to Grunig’s 1992 excellence study. This included the ability for an organization, through crisis inventory, to anticipate the type of crisis that it is likely to suffer (Fearn-Banks, 2001). The fact that the Virginia Tech tragedy was perpetrated by a psychologically troubled student reveals the need for universities to pay particular attention and develop appropriate responses to early warning signals given off by members of their own internal communities.

It is understood that despite its best efforts, no organization can prepare for every comprehensible crisis scenario (Penrose, 2000; Pearson, 2002). Yet the alarming similarities (Mitroff, 2002) of crises around the world suggests that they occur when there is a breakdown in the ability of organizations to translate lessons learned into effective prevention strategies. Mitroff (2002) notes that since 1979, all major calamities have followed an “ominous trend” (19). That is, in every crisis he has ever studied, there were always some central figures who witnessed the early warning signs of imminent danger and whose attempts to communicate those signs to people in charge were ignored. Sadly, the Virginia Tech massacre was no exception. The student gunman, Cho Seung-Hui, had a history of behavioural problems and was previously identified by the courts as a danger to himself (Lenckus, 2007). In fact, two female students complained to campus police that Mr. Seung-Hui was stalking them but, in the end, those students chose not to press charges (Lenckus, 2007). Earlier in the year, an English professor alerted school officials to scenes of disturbing violence in his work, but campus police chose not to act because the writings were not threatening and were part of a class assignment (Lenckus, 2007). Lenckus (2007) notes that due to current privacy regulations governing students’ mental health records “officials at many universities feel constrained about trying to identify possible student threats” (4). Determining what obstacles interfere with the recognition of warning signs and an organization’s ability to respond effectively remains a significant challenge faced by today’s public relations practitioners, and more specifically university communicators, when managing a crisis preparedness program.

Research Problem

Despite extensive literature on the nature of crisis communications, there is scant research exploring how a crisis experienced by an organization affects the crisis communications planning efforts of other equivalent organizations. We can improve our understanding of an organization's receptivity to early warning signs by investigating: to what extent an organization internalizes the lessons learned from a parallel crisis; the impact this event has on the organization's existing relationships with its priority publics; and how the event affects the organization's crisis mindset. According to Pauchant and Mitroff (qtd. in Flynn, 2002), an organization’s crisis communication mindset is “one in which the perceptions of senior executives determine cultural beliefs in the organization about the value and need for crisis management” (5). This mindset has profound

implications for strategic communications in crisis management programs as it guides how organizations must manage their stakeholder relationships in order to be crisis prepared. In the educational environment, this is particularly crucial as improved security measures demand that schools and their students collaborate more effectively to prevent crises. In fact, campus safety is increasingly being framed as a “shared responsibility” amongst members of the university community (Cohn, 2007: A7). This situation raises a fundamental question that this study attempts to address: how does a parallel crisis affect a university’s developing crisis mindset, and how does this impact its relationships with students as an element of crisis communication planning? By examining the impact of the Virginia Tech tragedy on Trent University’s crisis management efforts in this case study, it is hoped that new insights are gained about the way warning signs are perceived and handled as a reflection of crisis mindset development. Since the ability to take heed of warning signs is a critical factor in averting a crisis, this line of questioning may offer insights to ways of disrupting Mitroff’s (2002) “ominous trend” (19).

Research Questions

Using the experiences of Trent University as a case study, this research paper examines three core research questions:

RQ1: What crisis communication planning lessons did senior administrators take away following the violent events that occurred at Virginia Tech?

This question gauges how effectively information and analysis related to a parallel crisis is communicated to, and understood by the university’s dominant coalition.

RQ2: How and to what extent will these crisis communications lessons translate into Trent’s revised crisis communications plan and prevention strategies?

This question reveals the extent to which new lessons are incorporated into strategic communications as part of a crisis management planning, and the importance given to identifying and responding to warning signs.

RQ3: How is this new understanding of potential university-based crises affecting Trent’s relationships with its students?

This question explores what changes, if any, have surfaced in the relationship between Trent and its students following the Virginia Tech tragedy. It will also shed light on what changes are anticipated in this relationship in order for Trent to achieve its crisis preparedness objectives. Looking at the way Trent plans to communicate the need for risk awareness while maintaining a culture of openness and sense of security on campus is also examined through this question.

Organization to be Studied

The organization that was studied is Trent University, located in Peterborough, Ontario (Symons campus and Catharine Parr Traill College), with a satellite campus located in Oshawa, Ontario. Physically, Trent’s Symons campus occupies 1,400-acres at the north end of Peterborough straddling the Otonabee River where most of its residences, offices and academic buildings are situated. A smaller campus, Catharine Parr Traill College, is located in a residential area of downtown Peterborough. In Oshawa, Trent shares classroom, administrative and academic space on the campus of Durham College and the University of Ontario Institute of Technology.

Trent has approximately 8,200 undergraduate and graduate students, with 1,100 living on residence between the Symons, Traill and Oshawa campuses (Trent University, 2007). Its total staff and faculty complement is about 950. Fortunately, Trent has never suffered a murder or killing

rampage on any of its campuses, and has its own security officers plus a team of Emergency First Aid Responders to respond to any emergency situations should they arise.

The goal of this case study was to examine the impact of the Virginia Tech tragedy on Trent University's developing crisis mindset by assessing senior executives' perceptions of crisis and the university's strategic communications activities as part of its crisis management program.

Literature Review

In order to clarify the concepts under discussion in this research paper, the following definitions will guide the analysis:

Defining crisis: Fearn-Banks (2001) defines crisis as "major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization as well as its publics, services, products, and/or good name" (480). She goes on to list the five stages as detection, preparation/planning, containment, recovery, and learning (480). Penrose (2000) enhances this concept by describing a crisis as "an event that increases in intensity, falls under close scrutiny of the news media or government, interferes with normal business operations, devalues a positive public image, and has an adverse effect on a business' bottom line" (157). Pearson (2002) crystallizes these ideas further by stating that the main distinguishing feature of a crisis as compared to other events (commonly referred to as "firefighting") is that a crisis threatens the organization's viability (70).

Defining crisis communication: Considered the most important component of a crisis management plan (Penrose, 2000), Flynn (2002) describes crisis communication as "the verbal, visual, and/or written interaction between the organization and its publics (often through the news media) prior to, during, and after the negative occurrence" (4).

Defining crisis mindset: Flynn (2002) demonstrated the link between an organization's culture and its ability to respond effectively during a crisis event. He states that organizations that foster an open and participatory culture will be better prepared to prevent or mitigate potential threats. In order to practice excellent public relations, Flynn (2002) draws from Marra's (1998) theory that an organization's crisis mindset "must be strategic, have two-way symmetrical focus, and have the authority and autonomy to act quickly" (6).

Defining crisis management: In their definition of crisis management, Pearson and Clair (1998) recognize the role of an organization's publics as "a systematic attempt by organizational members with external stakeholders to avert crises or to effectively manage those that do occur" (61). Pearson and Clair went on to frame a definition of crisis management effectiveness as "when potential crises are averted or when key stakeholders believe that the success outcomes of short- and long-range impacts of crises outweigh the failure outcomes" (61).

Defining warning signs or signals: Described by Hopkins (1999) as a "series of discrepant events" that precede socio-technical disasters, warning signs are recognized indicators or preconditions that indicate a serious event is imminent and requires immediate, corrective action (141).

Defining parallel crisis: Parallel crisis is defined as a significant event experienced by an organization that indirectly affects other related organizations within the same industry, field or region. As Pearson (2002) writes, "when a competitor faces a crisis, suddenly the remote 'what if' threats take on a new immediacy and intensity" (70).

Defining crisis leadership: Flynn (2002) developed the essential attributes of crisis leadership which he defined as "the ability to motivate and empower an organization to strategically anticipate potential threats and opportunities and respond decisively to sudden challenges to the viability and legitimacy of the organization" (11).

A guide to determining an organization's sensitivity to warning signs is offered by Flynn (2002) in his examination of crisis leadership following 9/11. He concludes that it is essential for

organizations to adopt a new mindset for preventing and preparing for crises, and that the way to achieve this is by changing the way they lead and manage “in order to be open to, and aware of, the internal and external signals of potential crises” (10). Pearson (2002) further reinforces the link between organizational culture and warning sign detection and responsiveness by focusing on the way bad news is communicated in an organization. “In the best-prepared organizations, negative information that may foreshadow a crisis moves swiftly from employees to executives” (72). Another concept relevant to understanding the dynamics at play surrounding warning sign receptivity is the organization’s perception of a crisis. In Penrose’s (2000) study of the role of perception in crisis planning he concluded that an organization’s view of a crisis as an opportunity or a threat influences its willingness to engage in primary crisis management activities.

The importance of assessing an organization’s warning sign receptivity is critical, not just in terms of how a crisis can be averted, but also in determining the extent of crisis responsibility attributed to an organization. This concept of crisis responsibility strongly influences how successfully an organization will survive a crisis. As Coombs (2004) states: “attributions of crisis responsibility are directly related to the reputational threat posted by a crisis” (268). Using Coombs’ (2004) crisis types definitions and cues model, the Virginia Tech tragedy best fits under the “victim crisis cluster” which includes workplace violence, natural disasters, product tampering/malevolence, and rumours (270). This categorization is appropriate since the Virginia Tech crisis was caused by external forces beyond management’s control. However, because Mr. Seung-Hui’s mental instability and risk factors were known by school officials and community mental health workers to some degree, it can be argued that the Virginia Tech tragedy also qualifies under the “intentional crisis cluster” as a human error accident. This is defined by Coombs (2004) as “a person or people not performing their job properly” (270). Human error crises have higher attributions of crisis responsibility and therefore cause greater reputational damage to organizations because such mistakes are perceived as preventable (Coombs, 2004). Coombs (2004) also points out that “the news media often use past crises as frames for current crises” (284) which underscores the way other crisis events are brought to the fore when new crises erupt. In the post-Virginia Tech era where institutes of higher learning are expected by their stakeholders to demonstrate greater accountability (DeSanto & Garner, 2001), universities’ ability to learn from past crises, whether their own or experienced by others, can be seen as taking on even more significance.

Case Study Method

Applying the case study method to investigate the impact of a major, parallel crisis on another organization is useful in testing the following proposition: in order for an effective crisis mindset to develop within an organization, new leadership and management values and practices must be implemented in order to recognize, and respond appropriately, to internal and external signals of potential crises (Flynn, 2002). Flynn identified the eight characteristics that constitute what he calls a “crisis leadership mindset”. These are an organization’s ability to learn to be “solution focused; strategic; legitimate; flexible; open, participatory and communicative; empowering and motivating; decisive and determined; and concerned about human needs (internal and external to the organization)” (10). Penrose (2000) asserts that the degree to which organizations recognize the dual nature of a crisis as both an opportunity and a threat affects both its level of crisis preparedness and the effectiveness of its external communications. The role of leaders’ perceptions was also linked to crisis management planning in Pearson and Clair’s (1998) efforts to develop a conceptual framework integrating psychological, sociopolitical and technological-structural issues. Pearson and Clair (1998) argued that the perceptions of senior executives determine cultural beliefs in the organization about the value and need for crisis management. Single case studies are considered by Yin (2003) an

appropriate research method “when it represents a critical case in testing a well-formulated theory” (40). By studying the impact of the Virginia Tech tragedy on Trent University, the researcher assessed to what degree a parallel crisis led to the development of a crisis mindset at the upper leadership levels at Trent University, and how this change in thinking affected Trent’s approach to crisis management. The purpose of this case study was to gain a deeper understanding of how crisis mindset theory plays out in a specific context.

Another advantage of the single case study is when it captures a commonplace or typical situation (Yin, 2003). Although the Virginia Tech tragedy was far from an everyday occurrence, its impact on crisis planning is being shared by most universities across Canada (Joly, 2007). Therefore studying Trent University as a representational case using the single case study method is also instructive for other universities in dealing with the aftermath of the Virginia Tech shootings. As Yin (2003) states, “the lessons learned from these cases are assumed to be informative about the experiences if the average person or institution” (41).

Although case studies are criticized by some people for not contributing to scientific generalizations, they are not designed to provide a “sample” as in scientific research. Instead, the merits of case studies lay in their ability to expand or generalize theoretical propositions through rigorous analysis (Yin, 2003). Also, as opposed to divorcing a phenomenon from its context as in a laboratory experiment with controlled variables, Yin states that case studies are valuable because they help “to explain the presumed causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies” (15).

As recommended by Yin (2003), multiple data sources were used to strengthen the design of this case study, including interviews, documentation and archival material. Triangulating this data around the study’s three research questions enabled the researcher to develop “converging lines of inquiry” (Yin, 2003: 98) based on historical, attitudinal and behavioural issues.

Justification for Questions to be Used in Interviews

In order to study the development of a crisis mindset at Trent after the Virginia Tech tragedy, the following interview questions were drafted around the three research questions which form the structure of this case study.

RQ1: What lessons with regard to crisis communication planning did senior administrators take away following the violent events that occurred at Virginia Tech?

Interview Questions:

1. To what degree has the Virginia Tech tragedy affected the value you place on crisis planning at Trent University?
2. What have been your sources for information about the Virginia Tech tragedy?
3. To what extent has the Virginia Tech tragedy attuned you to crisis preconditions at Trent?
4. What do you think are the most important lessons for Trent to learn from the Virginia Tech tragedy with regard to the following three crisis management components:
 - a. Supporting students who exhibit mental instability?
 - b. Identifying and responding to warning signs?
 - c. Communicating while a crisis is unfolding?
5. What did you learn about crisis leadership from the way the Virginia Tech tragedy was handled by its senior administrators?

RQ2: How and to what extent will these crisis communications lessons translate into Trent’s revised crisis communications plan and prevention strategies?

Interview Questions:

1. How has the Virginia Tech event affected Trent's crisis communications planning efforts?
2. How important is the open flow of information internally to Trent's crisis management plan?
3. How will Trent educate the campus community to be sensitive to and communicate warning signs to school officials?
4. What core leadership qualities do you think are essential to crisis preparedness at Trent?
5. In your opinion, how smoothly does negative/threatening information travel along the chain of command at Trent?
6. In your opinion, what changes, if any, in organizational structure, internal policies, or government legislation or regulations would enhance Trent's responsiveness to a potentially threatening situation?

RQ3: How is this new understanding of potential university-based crises affecting Trent's understanding of its relationship with its students?

Interview Questions:

1. What changes, if any, have you observed in students' perceptions of campus safety at Trent since the events at Virginia Tech last April?
2. From your perspective, has the Virginia Tech tragedy affected Trent's relationships with its students?
3. Do you anticipate that Trent's relationship with its students will need to change in order to enhance crisis preparedness on campus?
4. In your opinion, how important is it that students share in the responsibility for campus safety with Trent administration?
5. In the post-Virginia Tech era, how will Trent strive to maintain a culture of openness and sense of security?

Data Collection Methods

Evidence for this case study was drawn from three main sources: interviews with senior administrators at Trent, current documentation, and archival material.

Since the purpose of this research is to understand how a parallel crisis affects the development of a crisis mindset within an organization, interviewing the senior administrators who lead this process was key. Based on Trent's organizational structure, there are four individuals who are most intimately involved in crisis communication planning and therefore represent the best sources for qualitative data. These are listed below.

- the president of the university
- the senior director of public affairs
- the senior director of student affairs
- the director of risk management

Each of the individuals holding these positions has worked at Trent for at least four years and experienced both the immediate and longer-term impacts of the Virginia Tech tragedy at Trent University. According to Yin (2003), "interviews are an essential source of case study evidence because most case studies are about human affairs" (92). Interpreting Trent's learning process following the Virginia Tech crisis is very much a sociological exercise that entails gathering data on the way its senior administrators internalized this event and acted on their understanding of its

implications for the university. Open-ended interviews are considered an effective way of eliciting key facts, opinions, and insights from individuals during a case study (Yin, 2003).

Documentary evidence was derived mainly from a review of Trent's draft current crisis communications and crisis management plans. This was useful in corroborating the information gathered during the interviews. Certain aspects of Trent's developing crisis mindset were also reflected in the current crisis plan documents.

In order to establish a starting point against which to compare any changes to Trent's crisis mindset, it was important to review some archival material, such as past crisis plans from Trent. Particular attention was paid to information in this material that relates to the handling of warning signs.

Data Analysis Techniques

In this case study, the researcher used the theoretical proposition of Flynn (2002) to guide her analysis of the evidence gathered. Flynn's proposition is that "for organizations to establish a new mindset that focuses on preventing and preparing for crises, they must change the way they lead and manage in order to be more open to, and aware of, the internal and external signals of potential crises" (10). This approach is described by Yin (2003) as "the most preferred strategy" to case study analysis as the proposition "helps to focus attention on certain data and ignore other data" (111).

Applying the pattern-matching technique enabled the researcher to show links between the data collected and the eight crisis mindset attributes identified by Flynn (2002). Pattern-matching strengthens a case study's internal viability when the results coincide with the expected patterns (Yin, 2003). Yin (2003) describes pattern-matching logic as "one of the most desirable techniques" for case study analysis (p. 116). The dependent variable being investigated in this proposed case study is the degree of learning, and the independent variable is the parallel crisis. Data gathered from the review of documentation and archival material will also be used to corroborate the interview evidence.

Results

The four individuals interviewed for this case study are listed below.

- Meri Kim Oliver, Senior Director, Student Affairs
- Louise Fish, Director of Risk Management
- Don Cumming, Senior Director of Public Affairs
- Bonnie M. Patterson, President and Vice Chancellor of Trent University

In addition to interviews with these four individuals, secondary research was gathered by reviewing two current documents from Trent:

1. Emergency Communications Plan (draft), dated January 11, 2008, prepared by the Marketing & Communications Office
2. Emergency Management Plan (approved), dated January 9, 2008, prepared by the Office of Risk Management

The archival material used in this case study was the October 30, 2006 version of the Crisis Response Plan. It is worth noting that there was no earlier version of the Emergency Communications Plan available for comparison because the current document was the first one ever developed for Trent.

RQ1: What lessons with regard to crisis communication planning did senior administrators take away following the violent events that occurred at Virginia Tech?

All interviewees demonstrated a detailed understanding of the context leading up to and the particular events that took place at Virginia Tech. They had paid close attention while the event unfolded and gathered information from a number of sources. These included university-sector specific news feeds such as the Ontario Committee on Student Affairs list serve, Academic Impressions, Paper Clip and Magna Pubs. As well, they monitored several American and Canadian news media, including The New York Times, Washington Post, and Canadian Broadcast Corporation. In addition, Meri Kim Oliver and Louise Fish had both thoroughly reviewed the *Report to the President on Issues Raised by the Virginia Tech Tragedy* prepared by the U.S. Departments of Justice, Education and Health & Human Services.

Each of the senior administrators interviewed consistently emphasized how the incidents at Virginia Tech substantially heightened awareness at Trent University around the importance of crisis preparedness and prevention. In describing the change, Louise Fish said:

“Previously, we had a crisis planning committee that kind of went in circles, and there was no sort of impetus. But something like that [Virginia Tech] really focuses people and allows us to take concrete steps to start making things happen... We got the immediate attention of the Board of Governors, our plan is much more focused, and now we have this mock crisis exercise scheduled.” (Louise Fish)

Some interviewees identified specific learnings that they took away from the Virginia Tech tragedy, while others noted how the event reinforced the significance of the crisis management principles that they already knew. These lessons, and who identified them, are listed below.

- **Communicating potential risks to publics automatically**, instead of deliberating over the need to do so. (Don Cumming)
- The importance of having a **campus violence policy** in place that governs the duty to report any unusual or potentially threatening behaviours of anyone on campus. Having this policy is also vital so that the flow of communication to Student Affairs is centralized, and individuals who are potentially at risk can be identified and supported. (Louise Fish and Meri Kim Oliver)
- The need to have a **campus-wide broadcast system** that facilitates immediate and segmented messaging to affected areas of the campus during a crisis. (Louise Fish, Don Cumming, and Bonnie Patterson)
- The importance of **being transparent** when communicating, especially as a crisis is unfolding. The lesson learned here is that it is better to over-communicate and be clear about what details are known and what is still not known. Also, the value of identifying the best-suited and most appropriate spokesperson was reinforced. (Louise Fish, Don Cumming and Bonnie Patterson)

Although each interviewee reported that the event did not change the high value they placed on crisis preparedness, they felt that several components of crisis planning were reinforced by Virginia Tech. Those components are listed below.

- The importance of having a **crisis communications plan** in place that defines the philosophy, flow, messaging and techniques of communication during a crisis. Trent’s Emergency Communications Plan was still in draft form in early 2008 and, prior to Virginia Tech, one did not exist. (Don Cumming and Louise Fish)
- The value of having active and well-developed **relationships with emergency response service providers** in the community (Louise Fish).

- The need for diligence in constantly **educating others about crisis preparedness and prevention.** (Don Cumming, Bonnie Patterson, Meri Kim Oliver and Bonnie Patterson)

Virginia Tech also served as a “wake up call” to other groups within the university, such as faculty members, human resources team, and the extended management team. Meri Kim Oliver noted that since Virginia Tech, “it has improved our communications ability, it has improved people’s understanding of crisis management, and it has improved their willingness to hear it.”

In addition to these specific learnings and increased awareness, Meri Kim Oliver conveyed that the primary value of Virginia Tech was its stark demonstration of the significant breakdown occurring in our society:

“The reality is you learn something new from every situation and you become differently predictive [...] What Virginia Tech has not done, is convince anyone that we have to change our culture. It’s convinced a whole lot of people that we have to change our response, and that we have to identify the signs, and that we have to respond as we go through that identification, but it has not convinced anyone that we have a massive culture problem that has to be changed.” (Meri Kim Oliver)

RQ2: How and to what extent will these crisis communications lessons translate into Trent’s revised crisis communications plan and prevention strategies?

The two most immediate effects were the drafting of the Emergency Communications Plan, and the development of the Campus Violence Policy, which clearly spells out the duty of all faculty and employees at Trent to report potentially threatening or unusual behaviours. Each of the interviewees also provided examples demonstrating how the lessons learned at Virginia Tech influenced crisis planning at Trent.

- Louise Fish and Don Cumming described how additional resources became available. These resources enabled them to purchase LED screens to broadcast emergency messages in high-traffic areas and change the existing phone system at Trent so it can serve as a campus-wide broadcasting system.
- President Patterson, Don Cumming and Louise Fish each pointed to the renewed emphasis on emergency training and plans to have a simulation crisis exercise in February 2008.
- Meri Kim Oliver described how promoting campus safety has long been a standard component in several programs run by the Office of Student Affairs, such as faculty training, new student orientation, introductory seminar week, and the training of residence dons. However, before Virginia Tech happened, she noted “we weren’t getting the turn out we are now, and we weren’t being as specific with it. I’m going to be offering two more workshops at faculty board, so hopefully we can get that to become core and offered every year.”
- Both Louise Fish and Meri Kim Oliver observed that more faculty members are contacting security and Student Affairs with concerns, and that students who are having issues on campus are now being identified more quickly. Negative or threatening information was seen to flow smoothly at the highest levels of the organization by each interviewee, however Meri Kim Oliver pointed to challenges receiving sensitive information when it originates from outside security or her department, despite efforts to educate others about the proper way to handle these situations:

“The Vice President’s Advisory Committee is a completely different group from when I came in, it’s a much more responsive group, it’s a group that understands the issues much more. The problem is when you get to that next level, you can’t count on extended

management or faculty board communicating the stuff they've got to their team." (Meri Kim Oliver)

Meri Kim Oliver noted though that, since Virginia Tech, there has been improved interaction between her Student Affairs managers and the other faculty and administrative departments.

Examples of unresolved issues relating to crisis communications were also shared by the interviewees.

- Meri Kim Oliver and Don Cumming both stated that a strategy for communicating directly to students in case of an emergency remains an area of concern for them. There are an unusually low number of Trent students who carry cell phones according to Meri Kim Oliver. Plans for students to identify their preferred method of receiving emergency communications and providing their contact information are still under discussion.
- Don Cumming also expressed some reservations about incorporating popular social media like Facebook into any crisis communications strategy. He said, "On the one hand, Facebook might be perceived as an opportunity to communicate, but on the other we're hearing how students are increasingly skeptical about the information they receive on Facebook."

When asked whether there were any internal policies, organizational issues, or legislation that hindered Trent's ability to communicate preventatively or during a crisis, the interviewees noted some examples.

- At the provincial level, President Patterson mentioned how following the Virginia Tech shootings, Trent participated in a consultation workshop on campus safety that was hosted by the Ontario Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities. She said at those consultations all the universities "made it clear to them [the Ministry] that there are some things we could do more of if we had the resources, but they [the universities] are always balancing issues of access, security and resources."
- Don Cumming also noted that current Freedom of Information legislation presented some challenges that prevented the university from recruiting help to look for a student at risk because to share his or her name would violate their privacy. "If this legislation were to change so this information could be shared in the event of a crisis or emergency, it may be more helpful for us to respond."
- Meri Kim Oliver pointed to Trent's "thin" administrative structure that could weaken the university's ability to communicate effectively prior to and during a crisis.

"In Student Affairs, there are seven departments and there is one person who is [union] exempt who has certain information. Because of how we are housed geographically, there is no one on this campus who sees me often enough to fill in the gaps. So, we have these huge holes, where if a person is missing, we have these huge holes that are not easily filled." (Meri Kim Oliver)

The interviewees characterized the issues listed above as needing attention, but also said they are not easily resolvable.

Further evidence of the effect of Virginia Tech on Trent's crisis communications planning can be found in the archival and documentation materials. In the October 2006 Crisis Response Plan, Fish (2006) defined the Communications Office's role as updating Trent's website and emergency hotline, handling media relations, and acting as the spokesperson. By comparison, in the January 2008 Emergency Management Plan (EMP) Fish (2008) includes these aforementioned roles, and

then expands the scope of the Communications Office’s role to include execution of the Emergency Communications Plan. Fish (2008) also provides more resources and technical details relating to crisis communication activities in the 2008 EMP, such as identifying the availability of the city’s Public Inquiry Centre should the volume of incoming calls (e.g. from parents) exceed Trent’s ability to respond. The 2008 EMP also demonstrates a much more robust approach to crisis planning than the earlier 2006 plan with additional sections including: hazard identification and risk assessment; emergency preparedness expectations of each department; and the introduction of incident command structures (Fish, 2008). The 2008 Emergency Communications Plan also outlines: specifically how emergency information will be made available; the roles of students and employees; sample messages and scripts for various crisis scenarios; how the use of warning broadcast technologies on campus will be phased in; and post-crisis communications strategies (Cumming, 2008).

Indications of an active crisis mindset amongst Trent’s leadership were evidenced in the interview responses. Table 1 illustrates how the eight attributes of a crisis leadership mindset as defined by Flynn (2002) corresponded to certain statements made by the interviewees when asked about essential leadership qualities in times of crisis. Seven of the eight attributes were reflected in the responses. The one outstanding attribute that was not specifically referred to was “empowering and motivating”.

Table 1
Qualitative Responses That Correspond to Crisis Leadership Mindset Attributes

Crisis Leadership Mindset Attribute	Interview Responses
Solution focused	“I think we have to constantly train and educate and inform so that people will see the value in reporting incidents.” (Bonnie Patterson) “We’re identifying areas where we’re risk vulnerable, not just shootings, but do we have the right financial controls in place, are the steps to the college ready to fall down, etc.?” (Don Cumming)
Strategic	“You have to have a strategic mindset...” (Don Cumming) “Crisis leadership entails having the intuition to predict where your position is vulnerable, and the ability to challenge your own senior administration team, identifying where we are weak and challenge your own team to improve it.” (Don Cumming)
Legitimate	“They have to be out there exuding confidence, and exuding caring, and a good leader will feel those things and be those things, but it has to come from a sense of integrity to do the right thing. In advance, not just at the time.” (Louise Fish)
Flexible	“You can create any environment you wish, but when you involve external parties, things change. Things aren’t always in your control.” (Bonnie Patterson)
Open, participatory and communicative	“They need to listen to their staff, they need it to be a two-way conversation...” (Louise Fish) “You can’t communicate enough, and communicating across all areas and having an expectation that others will lead cross-unit communications, that is really important.” (Bonnie Patterson)
Empowering and motivating	<i>No statements directly related to this attribute.</i>
Decisive and determined	“The quality of the decision will be based on the quality of the information they have. This isn’t something that just happens in a crisis, this is preparation way before that you’ve created a culture whereby you have information flow, and people trust in their leader.” (Louise Fish)
Concerned about human needs (internal and external to the	“Virginia Tech did a really good job at setting up support for their staff and allowing the memorial stuff to start evolving right away.” (Meri Kim Oliver) “The other learning is to try to ensure that victims and families and friends of victims and

organization	broader student body are supported.” (Bonnie Patterson) “Ensuring that people are aware that decisions are best made in calm state, and putting structures in place that will keep people calm and keep them safe and secure.” (Bonnie Patterson)
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RQ3: How is this new understanding of potential university-based crises affecting Trent’s understanding of its relationship with its students?

As Trent refocuses its crisis planning efforts following the Virginia Tech tragedy, there has been a clarification of roles and expectations between the university and students. When asked to what degree should students be responsible for their own safety, each member of the senior administration team stated that individual students are responsible for their own safety. Louise Fish stressed that Trent is responsible for communicating information so individuals can make informed decisions about what to do in a crisis situation. President Patterson placed dual emphasis on the responsibility of the individual to ensure his or her own safety, and the individual's role in contributing to a positive, secure campus atmosphere. She said “I think we can do things that not only protect ourselves but help to create the kind of environment that we want.” To accomplish this, President Patterson spoke of the value of the university and its students engaging in a healthy dialogue about these issues:

“We are a learning community, so the notion of raising the issues, debating them, talking about them very openly, sharing practices that occur, all of that is really important to sustaining a culture that accepts a finer balance on access and security.” (Bonnie Patterson)

Trent’s senior administrative team also saw a strong role for students in crisis planning activities and policies on campus. They indicated that student leaders were actively involved in the preparations for the emergency simulation exercise. Meri Kim Oliver noted that there remains a core group of students who typically do not participate in anything that is administratively driven, so it is difficult to engage them or to elicit their support in crisis planning. Trent’s relationship with this group of splenetics was not specifically affected by Virginia Tech and is not representative of the full student body. In fact, Meri Kim Oliver works closely with several student presidents of the college cabinets who distribute information to students on her behalf.

Conclusions and Limitations

Overall, the results of this case study revealed that a parallel crisis can have a substantial impact on an organization’s crisis mindset in the months immediately following the event. The effect of Virginia Tech on Trent resulted both in new lessons learned by senior administrative staff and a heightened awareness and activity level on campus with regard to crisis planning. Crisis communication planning in particular received a great deal of attention following the event.

With regard to warning sign awareness, Virginia Tech had a direct and clear impact on Trent. In addition to the operationalization of the Campus Violence Policy and increased training on reporting unusual behaviours, this case study also demonstrated how the parallel crisis seemed to crystallize a crisis mindset amongst Trent’s senior leaders. The interviews provided evidence of the existence of all the crisis leadership mindset attributes as defined by Flynn (2002) except one: empowering and motivating. The lack of emphasis on this particular aspect of crisis leadership could indicate that Trent’s senior administrators perceive crises slightly more as a threat than as an opportunity. Although this particular case study did not specifically set out to measure the crisis perceptions of

Trent University, this finding could have implications on the university's receptivity to warning signs as suggested by Penrose (2000).

Although the interviewees did note more questions and concerns coming from parents following Virginia Tech, they did not observe much of a change in the safety perceptions of Trent students themselves. Advising students to be aware of personal risks can hamper their ability to feel comfortable in a university community if suspicions become too dominant. However if Trent's leaders continue nurturing a culture of preparedness, they will be able to balance the need to foster a sense of openness and accessibility on campus with the need for a sense of security. Trent's emphasis on two-way communication to discuss concerns and solutions with students, faculty and employees, combined with regular training and simulation exercises can definitely be attributed to the impact of the parallel crisis at Virginia Tech.

This study was limited in a few ways. For example, to fully describe how much a parallel crisis affects an organization's crisis mindset, it would be necessary to compare it both before and after a crisis event. Having a baseline against which to measure the degree of change at Trent would have strengthened this case study.

In addition, since the researcher was an employee in the Marketing & Communications department at Trent University at the time of this study, it should be noted that there is the possibility of researcher bias. A steadfast effort was made by the researcher to undertake this case study with a critical and objective eye; however, due to her professional loyalty to Trent and personal connections to the university as an alumna, she may have predisposed to cast the university's crisis planning efforts in a favourable light.

This case study also revealed interesting implications for further study examining the difference between the American and Canadian crisis contexts, especially those involving post-secondary educational institutions. Media is a dominant, but not exclusive, source of information for institutions that are trying to understand a parallel crisis on the other side of the border. However, students, parents, and other priority publics may rely heavily on media coverage to shape their perceptions, and that reliance can obfuscate the distinctions between the two countries.

For example, in the high profile tragedies of Virginia Tech and Columbine, students were the shooters. That has not always been the case in Canada. Of the three campus shootings that have happened in this country, one was by a faculty member, one was by a registered student, and the third was by a total stranger who walked in off the street. The vastly different gun control laws in each country may also be a significant factor when evaluating the level of risk, as well as perceptions about crisis preparedness. And, as already noted, media is an important factor in informing attitudes about crisis prevention and management, so another variable worth further study is the impact of U.S. media saturation on Canadian perceptions of campus violence.

Appendix A
Interview Questionnaire for Trent Senior Administrators
with Brittany Cadence, Master of Communications Management Student
McMaster University

Introduction:

I'm working towards my master's degree in communications Management at McMaster University. One of the course projects I have been assigned is to complete a case study involving 3-4 interviews during the research phase. The subject I have chosen to study is crisis communications. The following questions have been designed in an attempt to gauge the impact, if any, of the Virginia Tech tragedy on Trent's crisis planning efforts. In some instances, there may be no effect, in other cases, there may be some change or a degree of change that you've observed. I will gladly share a copy of my final report when it is completed in February.

I would like to tape record our interview, if that is OK with you. Do you have any questions before I begin?

Interview Questions:

1. To what degree has the Virginia Tech tragedy affected the value you place on crisis planning at Trent University?
2. What have been your sources for information about the Virginia Tech tragedy?
3. To what extent has the Virginia Tech tragedy attuned you to crisis preconditions at Trent?
4. What do you think are the most important lessons for Trent to learn from the Virginia Tech tragedy with regard to the following three crisis management components:
 - a. Supporting students who exhibit mental instability?
 - b. Identifying and responding to warning signs?
 - c. Communicating while a crisis is unfolding?
5. What did you learn about crisis leadership from the way the Virginia Tech tragedy was handled by its senior administrators?
6. How has the Virginia Tech event affected Trent's crisis communications planning efforts?
7. How important is the open flow of information internally to Trent's crisis management plan?
8. How will Trent educate the campus community to be sensitive to and communicate warning signs to school officials?
9. What core leadership qualities do you think are essential to crisis preparedness at Trent?
10. In your opinion, how smoothly does negative/threatening information travel along the chain of command at Trent?
11. In your opinion, what changes, if any, in organizational structure, internal policies, or government legislation or regulations would enhance Trent's responsiveness to a potentially threatening situation?
12. What changes, if any, have you observed in students' perceptions of campus safety at Trent since the events at Virginia Tech last April?
13. From your perspective, has the Virginia Tech tragedy affected Trent's relationships with its students?
14. Do you anticipate that Trent's relationship with its students will need to change in order to enhance crisis preparedness on campus?
15. In your opinion, how important is it that students share in the responsibility for campus safety with Trent administration?

16. In the post-Virginia Tech era, how will Trent strive to maintain a culture of openness and sense of security?

Conclusion

We have reached the end of my questions. Before we wrap up, is there anything else related to crisis communications at Trent that you think we should discuss? Do you have any further questions or comments?

This concludes the interview. Thank you very much for taking the time to discuss crisis communications with me. If I have any follow up questions or need clarification on our interview discussion, may I contact you?

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