

Reconceptualizing Resilience and Renewal from the Perspectives of Reform and Reimagination

Timothy L. Sellnow

Clemson University
Clemson, SC, USA

Deanna D. Sellnow

Clemson University
Clemson, SC, USA

Abstract: Current crisis communication research frequently contrasts the merits of resilience with renewal. Resilience focuses on crisis response strategies intended to fortify an organization or community's capacity for withstanding crises. Renewal moves beyond resilience to include proactive strategies intended to thwart the recurrence of similar crises. In this essay, we propose extending this discussion to include reform and reimagination. Reform focuses on retrospectively making major changes to the status quo in response to a perceived pattern of failures. Reimagination promotes novel thinking to create collaborative strategies for proactively addressing compounding risks. Reform and reimagination are proposed as strategies for managing the increasingly complex nature of crises.

Keywords — crisis, risk, resilience, renewal, reform

SUGGESTED CITATION: Sellnow, T. L., & Sellnow, D. D. (2025). Reconceptualizing resilience and renewal from the perspectives of reform and reimagination. *Proceedings of the 2025 International Crisis and Risk Communication Conference*, 13(1) 28-31. <https://www.doi.org/10.69931/001c.142830>

INTRODUCTION

Current crisis communication research frequently describes efforts toward post-crisis resilience as bouncing back versus efforts toward post-crisis renewal as bouncing forward [1]. From this perspective, resilience is characterized as responding to a crisis with a commitment to rebuild with greater fortification. Conversely, renewal is portrayed as seeking new insights and revitalized virtues that reduce the potential for a similar crisis to occur in the future. Thus, organizations and communities responding to crises with resilience as the goal seek to bounce back with better crisis readiness, while organizations and communities responding with renewal as the goal seek to learn from and develop a prospective vision for avoiding similar crises in the future. From this perspective, all renewal efforts also achieve resilience, but not all resilience efforts result in renewal.

In this manuscript, we extend the metaphor of an organization or community bouncing back or bouncing forward with two additional questions. First, who is throwing the ball? Second, why is the ball being thrown in the first place? By addressing these additional questions, we extend the discussion contrasting resilience and renewal to include the concepts of reform and reimagination. To begin, we briefly highlight the resilience and renewal crisis communication literature. We then establish a conceptual framework that includes reform, resilience, renewal, and reimagination. We conclude with implications for the practical application of this extended framework. Ultimately, this analysis provides a more detailed and fitting framework for adapting crisis communication to account for the increasing complexity of crises.

ISSN: 3068-6539

© 2025 Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).

Publication rights are licensed to ICRCA.

<https://doi.org/10.69931/001c.142830>

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous research sought to clarify the distinction and interaction between resilience and renewal. Seeger and colleagues [2] summarize their comparison of resilience and renewal with two propositions. First, they note that renewal is more likely to occur than resilience when the crisis is severe, causing considerable disruption to the system. Second, they emphasize the role of communication in determining whether a crisis response reaches the level of renewal. Specifically, they observe that crisis communication constitutes the essence of the crisis, thereby determining whether publics perceive retrospective resilience or prospective renewal are needed. For example, a community experiencing flood damage restricted to several regions might undertake resilience efforts to fortify dikes in the impacted areas. Conversely, a community experiencing extensive damage and destruction due to a flood might engage in renewal efforts involving entirely new ways of managing floods such as costly but highly effective water diversion projects. Returning to our ball throwing metaphor, some crisis events are communicatively constituted from the perspective of bouncing back swiftly and efficiently. Others, usually more severe in nature, are communicatively constituted as a call for significant change and a reconceptualization of risk and crisis avoidance.

We argue further that risk related change can also take place on a grand scale without a crisis event ever triggering it. Boyd [3] conceptualizes sweeping organizational changes that are based on the communicative constitution of risk or frustration by stakeholders as actional legitimacy. Specifically, Boyd asserts that actional legitimacy, as opposed to institutional legitimacy, does not require a crisis. The foundation for this principle is the fact that an organization and community leader's perceived legitimacy or public support depends on whether they meet the public's expectations for safety and responsibility. If an organization or community's leaders lose their legitimacy, they are at risk of public rejection. Thus, actional legitimacy depends on the ability of organizations and communities to monitor public sentiment and to provide innovation when their perceived legitimacy wanes. For example, companies may choose to stop using selected dyes or ingredients in the products they produce, not because evidence indicates the substances are being used in dangerous quantities, but because public sentiment has delegitimized their acceptability.

Actional legitimacy on a grand scale can be conceptualized as reform. Reform results in sweeping changes of current policies and procedures based on public sentiment. Such change is often justified based on political campaign outcomes and can result in notable transformations impacting both those who support and those who do not support them. From a crisis communication perspective, convincing people to support reforms depends on arguing effectively that a pattern of negative events, not a single crisis, are linked with the status quo and significant reform is needed [4]. The success of these claims is based on the degree to which publics see the alignment of negative events and the proposed reform. Thus, the communicative justification for reform is largely retrospective. Current efforts in the United States to reframe the nation's role in providing food and medical aid to nations in need is an example of reform based on negative examples, supported or unsupported with evidence, involving corruption and fraud.

An equally compelling form of actional legitimacy, is reimagination. Like reform, reimagination is not linked to a single event. Rather, reimagination observes a state of what Sellnow and Sellnow [5] describe as mega-risk. Mega-risk occurs when multiple risks or crises, sometimes at a mega-crisis level, continue unresolved thereby demanding broad-based prospective solutions. From this perspective, problems are analyzed on macroscopic levels not previously considered. No single crisis is seen as a full representation of the problem. Rather, multiple risks and crises interact over time to create risk on an unprecedented level. Consequently, unprecedented vision is needed to (re)imagine solutions not previously considered or fully contemplated.

RECONCEPTUALIZING RESILIENCE AND RENEWAL

We propose reconceptualizing the tension between resilience and renewal more fully to include the broader concepts of reform and reimagination. This reconceptualization, we argue, is needed to account for the evolution of risk and crisis communication. Crises are increasingly complex, requiring broader and more creative solutions. Challenges such as climate change have produced super wicked problems where time is short, those causing the problem pose competing solutions, the central authority needed to formulate an international solution is lacking, and explanations of looming risks in the future are discounted by some [6]. In short, as crises intensify, the means needed to formulate viable solutions are constrained. Thus, existing conceptual frameworks for crisis communication warrant reconsideration and possible expansion.

Initially, we see reform and reimagination as strategies for moving beyond a single crisis to account for mega-risk revealed through interactive patterns among multiple crises loosely linked by context. Reform retrospectively accounts for a perceived pattern of crises or other forms of failure that require substantial revisions of the status quo. Reimagination requires observers to proactively reframe their thinking to a macro level where individual crises and risks are seen as manifestations of more threatening hazards. Crisis communication for reform and reimagination is essential to forming the level of collaboration needed to co-create and enact substantial and meaningful changes. Table 1 provides a summary of the four concepts and their applications.

Table 1

Characterizing Reform, Renewal, Resilience, and Reimagination

Strategy	Perspective	Scale	Timing	Outcome
Resilience	Retrospective	Micro	Post Crisis	Fortifying existing strategies for crisis mitigation and survival
Reform	Retrospective	Macro	Pre or Post Crisis	Sweeping changes to the status quo to atone for consistent past failures
Renewal	Prospective	Micro	Post Crisis	Making changes based on lessons learned that emphasizing strategies for reducing risk similar failures in the future.
Reimagination	Prospective	Macro	Pre or Post Crisis	Solutions derived from creative thinking where previous constraints and failures are suspended to allow novel thinking and innovative thinking

Returning to our ball bouncing and throwing metaphor, reform and renewal are less concerned with bouncing back or bouncing forward than resilience and renewal. Reform is more interested in answering the question: Who is throwing the ball? The purpose of this question is to determine the cause of repeated crises with an emphasis on the current structures in place. The retrospective focus is on how and why existing policies and procedures continually and consistently fail to prevent negative outcomes such as crises. Reimagination goes a step further to ask: Why is the ball being thrown in the first place? Particularly, what are the unanticipated consequences of interactions among risks and hazards that we have never considered? The potential solutions to super wicked problems, from the perspective of reimagination, is to think the unthinkable and discover what may have been apparent but unrecognized in our haste to address individual crises.

IMPLICATIONS FOR APPLYING RESILIENCE, REFORM, RENEWAL, AND REIMAGINATION

While we are confident in our assertion that some crisis events are evidence of patterns warranting reform or reimagination, we also accept that reaching these response levels cannot occur in all crisis circumstances. Therefore, we discuss several implications for enacting these more complex crisis response forms.

Initially, reform and reimagination require considerable time for engaging in dialogue and gathering evidence. Co-creating solutions of this magnitude are time-intensive. In the moment of a crisis eruption event, urgency is required to mitigate harms. Hence the deliberations of reform and reimagination cannot, by their nature, operate solely as crisis response strategies. Communication on this grand level must be relentless in the continuous pursuit of safety. We accept that reform can be politicized and enacted quickly in some cases. The merits of such reform, however, are likely to be diminished without collaborative dialogue.

The four forms of crisis resolution are not always compatible. We argue above that all renewal is resilience, but not all resilience is renewal. Likewise, all reimagination produces reform, but not all reform is reimagination. Reimagination requires innovative thinking that produces alliances and co-created outcomes previously unseen. Conversely, reform can result in major changes that are a discontinuation of policies and procedures deemed ineffective. This discontinuation can simply involve a return to the past. Contrastingly, reimagination inherently seeks new and creative actions that account for changes previously unanticipated. This distinction between the retrospective nature of reform and the prospective nature of reimagination can create a clash or stasis point between those advocating reform and those advocating reimagination. In issues of risk and safety, stasis points are themes of disagreement where parties frequently contest each other's evidence and quibble over acceptable risk tolerance thresholds [7]. Accordingly, all parties may recognize the need for systematic change in response to patterns of crises but remain divided on their decision to advocate for reform or reimagination.

Both reform and renewal require motivation beyond that of a single crisis to produce systematic change. For some parties, a single dramatic event such as a devastating hurricane (e.g. Hurricane Katrina) or a school shooting involving children (e.g. Sandy Hook) are sufficient to begin progress toward reform or renewal. For others, even repeated crises are insufficient. Such parties are not motivated to act until the crises reach an existential level (e.g. 9/11). Even when sweeping motivation occurs and substantial changes are made worldwide, the potential for that motivation to lapse and for progress to be lost is always present (e.g. Polio vaccination). Consequently, communication advocating for substantial change on the levels of reform and renewal require must motivate action and validate continuous commitment.

Clearly there are challenges for moving beyond resilience to reform and beyond renewal to reimagination. As a result, only the most complex and compelling risks and crises are likely to garner the support needed for reform and reimagination. Nevertheless, the potential benefits of addressing problems that reach the super wicked level are worthy of the time and effort needed for analysis and communication at the highest levels.

CONCLUSION

As crises continue to increase in their intensity and frequency, response strategies must likewise increase in their capacity and sustainability. Debate in the crisis communication community should not then be based on a question of whether bouncing back or bouncing forward is the best strategy. Rather, scholars must ask more difficult questions based on mega-risk caused by the interaction of multiple risks and crises and the impact these interactions have on the health and safety of individuals globally. Adding the concepts of reform and reimagination to the discussion of effective crisis communication response strategies extends our current understanding of risk and crisis communication to the macro level. Ultimately, this

expanded perspective better equips crisis communication scholars to participate in the development of meaningful change in response to the complex interactions among evolving risks and crises.

Author Biography

Timothy L. Sellnow (Ph.D. Wayne State University) is Professor of Communication at Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA tsellno@clemson.edu

Deanna D. Sellnow (Ph.D. University of North Dakota) is Professor and Chair of the Department of Communication at Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA dsellno@clemson.edu

REFERENCES

- [1] Ketter, E. (2022). Bouncing back or bouncing forward? Tourism destinations' crisis resilience and crisis management tactics. *European Journal of Tourism Research*, 31, 3103-3103. <https://doi.org/10.54055/ejtr.v31i.2748>
- [2] Seeger, M. W., Nowling, W., & Seeger, H. S. (2024). Keystone theories of postcrisis discourse: communication theory of resilience and discourse of renewal. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 32(1), e12533. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5973.12533>
- [3] Boyd, J. (2000). Actional legitimation: No crisis necessary. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(4), 341-353. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1204_3
- [4] Cwalina, W., & Falkowski, A. (2018). Crisis management: government strategy in framing reform proposals and communications. *Journal of Political Marketing*, 17(2), 122-136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15377857.2018.144775>
- [5] Sellnow, T. L., & Sellnow, D. D. (2024). *Before crisis: The practice of effective risk communication*. Cognella.
- [6] Levin, K., Cashore, B., Bernstein, S., & Auld, G. (2012). Overcoming the tragedy of super wicked problems: constraining our future selves to ameliorate global climate change. *Policy sciences*, 45(2), 123-152. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-012-9151-0>
- [7] Strait, P., Lemuel, J., Albert, L., & Venette, S. J. (2024). The function of stasis in risk and safety controversies. In T. L. Sellnow & D. D. Sellnow (Eds.), *Communicating risk and safety* (pp. 197-218). De Gruyter.