The Theory of Gradual Landing of Public Opinion During Crises

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Abstract

Public opinion is under consideration not only in the media but also in other fields, such as political science, social studies, and psychology, especially with the growing crises affecting institutions and countries during the 20th and 21st centuries. It is noticeable that there are few theories that explain many of the phenomena associated with public opinion, especially in the era of modern communication technologies and social media. This gap necessitated the development of a theory of gradual landing in public opinion during crises. This theory was developed by reviewing extensive literature on public opinion, crisis management, and media theory related to public opinion. The theory deals with four major variables: event, media, audience, and the parties involved in the conflict or crisis. These variables encompass the mechanisms that determine the paths on the rise and decline of public opinion issues. This theory integrates the degree of the significance of the topic and the media's interest. This theory helps identify various cases of rise and decline in the level of interest in public opinion within society.

1. Introduction

The Age of Enlightenment emerged in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; it was an intellectual and philosophical movement that resulted in the emergence of Western democracy in Europe. In this era, we witness the emergence of the idea of public opinion by several philosophers, such as Tocqueville, Tönnies, Price, and Walport (Noelle–Neumann, 1974). Due to the significance of public opinion, Shakespeare called public opinion the 'mistress of success,' and Blaise Pascal thought it was 'the queen of the world'; John Locke considered that the world is subject to three laws: the divine law, the civil law, and the law of opinion (Opinion Public in Wikipedia, 2021).

Public opinion was evolved with studies of communications and the media. In 1922, the American journalist Walter Lippmann wrote his famous book, *Public Opinion*, in which he drew attention to the concept of public opinion and its relationship with the media. He pointed out that the media link the events we experience in the world and the images within our minds. This mass media effect is associated with the concept of public opinions, such as the Agenda Setting Theory (Shaw & McCombs, 1972), the Spiral of Silence Theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1974), and other theories.

Public opinion focuses on an issue or an event; usually, it is an event or incident that appears in the media or by the audience. Over the past decades, the number of events that have affected public opinion has increased, locally or internationally. Such events or incidents could be a crisis for an institution, company, government agency, or country. When the issue or the event is widespread and takes the attention of public opinion, the issue or the event passes through ups and downs. Thus, crisis management teams seek to handle the crisis immediately. In this regard, the goal is to have the issue of public opinion decline gradually. Therefore, this study discusses this matter by developing the theory of the *gradual landing of public opinion*.

1.1 The Research Problem

Many communication theories are linked to the effects of the media. During the first half of the twentieth century, the concept of maximum effects of the media appeared, such as the theory of the magic bullet or the hypodermic needle model. These models state that the media message has a magical effect on the audience. Still, this concept soon declined as a result of studies indicating that there are factors other than the media that affect an individual's decisions, whether politically, such as elections, or economically, such as the decision to purchase (Klapper, 1960). Other theories have emerged that have revived interest in the power of the media, such as the theory of agenda setting, the spiral of silence theory, cultivating theory, the knowledge gap, and other theories and intellectual trends in Europe, such as Marxist

theory and the works of Frankfurt School (the Critical School) that branched out from it, and the works of the French philosophical thought of scholars such as Michel Foucault and others.

Public opinion remains a subject under consideration not only in the media but also in other fields, such as political science, community studies, psychology, and others. With the growing crises that institutions and countries are going through during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this study seeks to conceptualize a theory of public opinion that is affected by the ups and downs of topics and issues of public opinion, which is not clearly conceptualized. Public opinion literature requires that four elements be discussed together: event, media, audience, and the parties involved in the conflict or crisis.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The study seeks to achieve a primary goal: developing a theory referred to as the gradual landing of public opinion.

2. Theoretical Reviews

There is a close connection between theories of public opinion and theories of mass communication. Since the beginning of effects studies in the 1930s and 1940s, public opinion has been an essential component in many of these studies. Mass media are the common thread between effects studies and the communication theories in modern societies. These studies also intersect in the two fields with the element of the audience, as it is the same audience who is measured as the influence of the media and the same audience that is surveyed on public opinion issues.

It is not surprising that the beginning and emergence of communication studies began with several classical books, including *Public Opinion* written by Walter Lippman (1922), a journalist and politician who was credited with establishing the interest in public opinion in the United States of America; this was reflected in the emergence and development of the field of media and effects studies. But, the real beginning of the development of the science of communication was set by Harold Lasswell, who was one of the first to study the basis of propaganda; he based his perception on the strong role of the media in influence and persuasion or as it was called in that period, the theory of the magic bullet (also known as the theory of hypodermic needle), which states that the media message has magical effects in influencing the audience.

There are indicators that supported the powerful influence of the media in that period, including the spread of radio as a new means of media in the United States, Europe, and other countries of the world, as well as the successful use of propaganda as political content, especially in the First World War, and in Germany after Adolf Hitler took control over political and cultural life. He used propaganda in its various channels to brainwash the German people, and he succeeded in accomplishing this objective. Moreover, the spread of opinion polling centers and the concept of public opinion helped promote power of the media (Alkarni, 2018).

Lazarsfeld made the second stage in the development of effects studies in his book *The People's Choice*. The study of Gaudet and Berelson (1948) about American voters has proven that other factors affect political decisions other than exposure to the media, including the social environment to which the individual is connected; this concept made the researchers reconsider the extent of the power of the media. Thus, studies have turned to the concept of limited effects of media. Therefore, the theory of two step-flow of information appeared to indicate the presence of opinion where leaders in a society intervene with messages in the media and reinterpret them to the rest of individuals in the society. This rationale indicates the presence of intermediaries between the media and the public that weakens the role and the direct influence of mass media. Joseph Klapper summarized the new stage of the development of the concept of influence in his book, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (Klapper, 1960).

In the 1970s, the third stage of the development of effects studies appeared through several theories, which was a return to the concept of media power. Many theories point to the power of the media and its role in influencing the public, such as the following theories: uses and gratifications, diffusion of innovations, agenda setting, the spiral of silence, cultivation theory, knowledge gap, and others, in addition to the critical school, its sub-branches: culture studies and the political economy of mass communication, and the European Marxist school, which points out the centrality of the media in creating awareness, thought, and culture. During the period that followed, the sixties of the twentieth century, many ideas emerged that restored the concepts of the power of the media and its influence on audiences (Alkarni, 2018).

In the 1990's and the beginning of the twenty-first century, a fourth stage of communication studies began, in which the power of the media was confirmed with varying circumstances. The postmodern thought of French philosophers such as Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard, and others showed that the media possesses sufficient power to influence culture and society; moreover, the emergence of the internet contributed to the continued power of the media at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Self, 2013).

In addition to the four stages, new divisions emerged that reflect the development of communication studies, not through the media's dual strength or limited influence, but through other dimensions. Through a study on the development of communication studies over the course of fifty years, Russell Neuman and Lauren Guggenheim came up with six divisions that reflect the development of this scientific field (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011). These researchers relied on citation analysis since 1956, and have analyzed more than twenty thousand studies in five major periodicals in the field of communication during the same period. Both researchers attained the following divisions:

1. Persuasion theories

2. Active audience theories

3. Social context theories

4. Media and society theories

5. Explanatory theories

6. New media theories (Neuman & Guggenheim, 2011)

These divisions accumulate over time. For example, the beginning of communication studies were concerned with persuasion and propaganda. The most recent studies include new media theories, which reflect the contemporary period after the introduction of the internet.

2.1 Public Opinion

The literature of public opinion is full of many definitions formulated by researchers from various fields of knowledge, and these definitions reflect their affiliations with their original fields. These definitions were summarized by Carol Glenn et al. (2018), where the set of definitions that she mentioned were linked to different dimensions of public opinion as follows:

• Public opinion is the sum of individuals' opinions.

• Public opinion is a reflection of the beliefs of the majority.

• Public opinion results from a conflict among the interests of groups.

• Public opinion reflects the influence of the media and the elite.

Glenn presented three dimensions of public opinion: (1) attitude, which means any attitude that an individual takes towards a position (for or against); (2) Sharpness, which means the degree of sharpness in the opinions adopted by individuals or groups; (3) Stability, which means stability in one's opinion over time, and the lack of fluctuation (Glenn et al., 2018).

Public opinion is linked to communication theories, specifically those concerned with the influence that the media has on the public, given that the topics of public opinion are transmitted by these means, and the extent of the impact is the extent to which the media plays a role in the topics of public opinion. Suppose the concept of theory supports the power of influence; in that case, this means that the media plays a significant role in influencing public opinion, as it was the case during the two world wars and the period between them. The Nazi propaganda, which was led by Hitler and his propaganda minister, Goebbels, succeeded in influencing the German people, as well as the Europeans and other peoples.

In the case of the poor influence of the media, this means that social factors in the individual's personal environment affect his decision and attitude towards a certain topic of public opinion (Klapper, 1960). However, the theory of agenda setting quickly restored the glory of the media, as a number of studies proved a positive relationship between the media agenda and the audience's agenda, reflecting that the audience has adopted the media's agenda. When the media covers several public opinion topics or any other topics, they are reflected in the audience's attitude; this means that the media succeeded in planting this agenda in the audience's minds.

Of course, this effect does not reflect the audience's attitude toward the issue or topic. Still, the audience's attention to that topic is primarily due to McCombs and Shaw's affirmation that the media may not be able to tell people how to think, but they can tell people what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). This distinction between influencing interest in topics and imposing attitudes towards topics is significant. This means that the media can impose the topics but not attitudes towards them. Issues of public opinion and the management of these issues emphasize convincing the audience to be for or against a particular issue, which illustrates the importance of creating the audience's opinions.

Agenda setting theory has different levels, including two related theories: framing theory and priming theory. The framing theory works as the second level of the agenda setting theory. This theory states that the way in which a topic or issue is dealt with in the media has an impact on the way the public understands and perceives the issue or topic.

Entman (1993) explained that frames are when the media highlights aspects of a situation to influence the audience to take one side of the issue. This theory helps the public opinion management of any institution or organization in building a positive image about a specific topic or in the direction to which it wants to lead the issue of public opinion.

Priming theory is an extension of the agenda setting theory as well. It also stipulates that motivating media influences others by providing reasons for the audience to help understand the message directed by the media. While agenda setting theory makes some issues more prominent to the public than others, the media, in priming theory, works to form the considerations the individual uses to make decisions and attitudes toward the situation (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

In 1974, a German political science researcher, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, developed one of the most important public opinion theories, entitled *The Spiral of Silence*. She wrote her theory in nine pages (a conclusion of a long study in the German language). The basis of her theory is that when an individual believes that their opinion on an issue or topic is within the minority's opinion, they hesitate to express it for two reasons: (1) to avoid social isolation and (2) fear of revenge. That is why they usually resort to silence and lack of expression, which is what makes the silence of the minority continue regarding public opinion. The media plays a considerable role in revealing the prevailing opinions and the opinions of the majority, from which the individual infers that their opinion contradicts those opinions circulated in the media (Noelle-Neumann, 1974).

Noelle-Newman (1974) pointed to the relationship between the media and public opinion by asserting that the media is what creates public opinion. She further clarified that when individuals search the surrounding environment for what is going on inside it, they find that the media provides them with the information they need to help them survey the environment, and show them the leading public opinion attitudes regarding any issue or topic; ignoring topics and issues may mean that these topics and issues are unimportant or socially undesirable (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). The spiral of silence theory is among the most important theories that have confirmed the power of the media, along with the agenda setting theory, cultivation theory, and the theory of uses and gratifications during the seventies of the twentieth century.

This theory has received many applications in many countries, especially Western countries. Glenn et al. (1997) reviewed several studies to find out whether the willingness to express one's opinion is affected by the extent of social support that the individual perceives such opinions. They concluded that survey studies should focus on the individual's desire for realistic examples and not only on usually assumed perceptions of this desire.

2.2 Crisis Communication

Under the umbrella of the crisis, all incidents and conflicts occur among institutions, vendors, and countries. The global terrorism database website has monitored the number of terrorist incidents from 1970 to 2019; more than two hundred thousand local and international terrorist incidents occurred in the world. This study concerns communication crises related to public opinion, although some terrorist incidents may apply to communication crises.

A crisis occurs when the public system is exposed to a state of instability that leads to a degree of ambiguity and requires urgent intervention. In terms of communications, a crisis occurs when the position and symbolic values of the institution are exposed to danger and threat (Pearson & Ian Mitroff, 1993). Moreover, the crisis could also be defined as a threat to the stakeholders' expectations of an institution that affects the institution's performance. When the audience sees that the institution is in crisis, it is in crisis unless the institution convinces the audience that it is not so (Coombs, 2009). In addition, a crisis is an event that negatively affects the institution; it is a social, political, and cultural phenomenon that groups and institutions see as threatening the confidence in an institution (Falkheimer et al., 2010).

A professional communicator who manages a crisis in an institution in which deaths and injuries occur points out the experience of crisis in two aspects: (1) The procedures for confronting the crisis was prepared in advance and kept in the communications department and were not adequate, despite their importance; such procedures had to be modified during the events that occurred in that crisis; (2) persons in charge of managing the situation face the crisis directly. Instead of representing a midfielder (soccer) passing balls (roles) to other teammates (players), they now play as goalkeeper and a striker at the same time. This is similar to a communication official trying to negotiate the situation and solve the problem through negotiation skills and psychological work (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010).

Crisis communication provides fundamental concepts for professionals working in this field, including speed, transparency, and intelligence. Specifically, there are two strategies that the crisis communication team should work on: (1) It is necessary to respond with maximum speed to disseminate information to the relevant parties and to the audience; (2) the information and messages must be clear and articulated (Falkheimer & Heide, 2010, p. 515). There is no doubt that increased attention to the issue may be required in some situations, but this may negatively lead to results that are undesirable. If we look at the coronavirus crisis (COVID-19), for example, many crisis management teams

wanted to increase public opinion's interest in the situation of the pandemic or other related topics. Still, the maximum increase of pandemic news may lead to a maximum increase in tension and anxiety among the audience. Thus, there is an calculation which must be considered carefully before deciding to create maximum public interest in that matter.

2.3 Chaos Theory

Chaos is an old theory that was developed more than one hundred and forty years ago; the first person to shed light on this theory was the French mathematician Henri Poincare in 1880 when he was reviewing one of the physical, mathematical theories branching off from Isaac Newton's law of gravity. He was followed by the French mathematician Jacques Hadamard, who was interested in "number theory" in mathematics. The greatest interest in chaos theory did not come until after the middle of the twentieth century when linear theory could not explain behaviors that interfere with the system and had no basis or explanation (Chaos Theory, 2021).

Chaos theory should be examined and studied as it may benefit the institution's (organization's) or company's work, regardless of its field and work. Levy (1994) explained that chaos theory is related to the organization in terms of the industrial sector, for example, to which the company (or institution) is linked. It is a complex, dynamic, and non-linear system and is linked to many parties, such as consumers, workers, government, and financial institutions (p. 170). This interaction among these parties means that any decision made by one party inevitably affects the rest of the other parties.

We should not understand chaos theory as chaos in its traditional sense among people. Given the sensitivity that characterizes the organization's or institution's inputs, it means that any small or simple disturbance multiplies over time. Thus, these disturbances may lead to large, complex, unexpected events, which is precisely the essence of chaos theory. Let's look at events that seem simple at the beginning, like many crises experienced by companies, institutions, and countries, but at the end, they end in disasters, complex emergencies, and major storms, and their dimensions and repercussions in the long term cannot be expected. In many cases, when these inputs are unpredicted, the outcomes are unexpected. The researcher provides examples of companies or banks that were struck by events that led them to declare bankruptcy or be possessed by other companies due to internal corruption, irregular inputs, or incorrect product expectations:

Many companies and organizations in various countries were exposed to setbacks that led them to bankruptcy, liquidation, or takeover. First, they were exposed to simple and small events at the beginning, which worsened into larger events. Within those events were administrative corruption and unexpected events that ended the existence of those companies and institutions. Most of these companies are multi-purpose international companies. Still, some local companies and organizations met the same inevitable fate and were struck by unexpected events. These collapses may lead to results that have devastated the leadership of these companies and institutions. Here we point out that the company or institution is like an organic organism exposed to small inputs (a virus or bacteria) that enter the organism's body. These organisms are quickly exposed to internal chaos that is difficult to control if they cannot control such inputs directly upon their entry.

Fraud or similar actions pose a serious challenge to any company, and public relations will face a real crisis in order to cope with such negative images about the company in the media. Accusation of fraud strikes to the heart of the company, and in particular in its relationships with the public. In such cases, public relations employs third parties to validate facts about the organization. "If a company's credibility is itself under attack, then the most effective rebuttal will come from third parties" (Serafin, 2008. p 91).

3. The Theory

This study presents a proposed theory of public opinion entitled, "The theory of the gradual landing of public opinion during crises." This theory is summarized in the following text:

"Public opinion operates according to a complicated system of conflicting elements in a public sphere,   in the center is a topic or event, which formed during a crisis, mediated by the media, and based on the public at large, the interest in that topic or event rises and declines according to a temporal law that controlled by many parties: institutions, groups, or countries. It aims to make constructive adjustments in the structure of society, its functions, and its policies"

3.1 Theoretical Foundations

After a brief and focused review of related literature in the fields of communication theories, public opinion theories, crisis communication literature, and chaos theory, it is necessary to know the common element that links all this literature in view of the formation of a new theory of public opinion. Here are some of the foundations that are associated with this theory:

1. Media, through its various visual, audio, and published channels, is the cornerstone of all aspects of life during the age of mass communication for about five centuries. Media are the basic element in those aspects, including public opinion.

2. Public opinion is a phenomenon that dates to many centuries, specifically since the emergence of the concepts of democracy in the age of enlightenment in Europe, and to this day, it remains a fundamental basis in public affairs issues.

3. The world is a group of small or large organizations and institutions that are organic entities exposed to many changes from within or outside those organizations.

4. The world is full of endless crises whose causes and fields are numerous, but they remain a constant variable in the life of organizations, institutions, and countries.

5. The crisis begins with inputs to the organization's environment. These inputs are small initially, but they grow over time, with the interactions of central parties in the situation, and end with incidents that may lead to unexpected disasters.

3.2 Elements of the Theory

We present here four elements of the theory, shown in (Figure 1). Those elements are major concepts of the theory. All are general concepts used in many studies of public opinion and communication theory.

1. Crisis or event: Public opinion discourse tend to revolve around key issues of the day, which are circulated in the media and in turn affecting citizens' attitudes, behaviors and cognitions (Moy & Bosch, 2013). The issue or event in the public's opinion is the main catalyst; without an event or issue, there is no need to take a position by the public. There are many issues and events in the world, including those that are social, economic, political, cultural, environmental, and more.

2. Parties: Every crisis has related parties (stakeholders) that may be central to the crisis, or secondary parties, but they are less influential to the course of the event and the crisis. In terms of crisis, the organization or company, has to work with stakeholders, including shareholders who are part of the company and affected by any trust problems with company leaders. The list of stakeholders includes related government agencies, trade unions, bankers, and financial analysts. The organization should work with all parties and   stakeholders (Anthonissen, 2008).

3. Media: Media is an essential element that intersects with all other elements. In the age of mass communication, media plays an important role in interactions with all aspects of life, such as social media. Social media can be described as the online technologies and practices used to share information, opinion, and content through discussions and via relationships (European Commission, 2024). In case of a crisis event, social media will accelerate discussions and intensify opinions. Researchers have indicated that case studies of natural disasters, terrorist activities, and political and social upheavals account for most of the activity on social media during emergency and crisis situations. This consistent social media use forces traditional organizations to adapt to evolution in information presentation.

4. Public: Public has different meanings; sometimes it is associated with community, crowd and audience. The present theory conceptualizes the public as a community. They are an essential factor that places the crisis in a social and humanitarian context. Here, we have to specify the public in one territory of social identity. The public depends on the issue or event, which could be at a state, national and international level.

The study does not attempt to operationalize those concepts at the present level of the study. However, this will be required in more advanced applications of the theory.
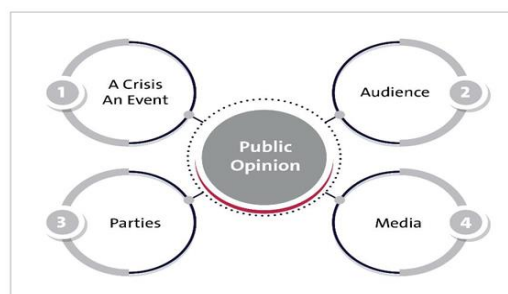

Figure 1. Elements of public opinion theory

3.3 Variables of the Theory

In an attempt to understand public opinion trends, two basic variables should be noted:

1. Degree of importance: the extent and magnitude of the importance of the topic or issue circulated in public opinion for the individual or the public in general. This variable is a reflection of the salience of the issue in public polls or survey studies.

2. Degree of interest: the extent of interest generated around the topic by the media (traditional or new media). This is a basic variable used in media studies to measure the attention given by mass media toward any particular topic. The method used to analyze this variable is content analysis.

Through these two variables, the four angles (possible options) of public opinion can be measured as follows (Figure 2):

1. No (1) indicates a high degree of media and audience interest. This means that the issue or topic has reached the peak in public opinion.

2. No (2) indicates a high degree of media interest with a low degree of audience interest. This implies a mismatch between the interests of the media and the interests of the audience; this potentially means that the media did not succeed in imposing its agenda on the audience or did not have any influence on the course of the topic or issue.

3. No (3) indicates a high degree of public interest with a low degree of media interest. This implies a mismatch between the interests of the media and the interests of the audience; this means that the audience has sources other than the media to survey the social environment to understand what is going on.

4. No (4) indicates a low degree of media and public interest or a zero degree of interest regarding the topic or issue. Media and public are not affected by certain topics and issues in a society, and no issue or topic requires the attention of all media or the public.

Taking the COVID-19 pandemic as an example of the world-wide event crisis, this model shows the important role of social media as a platform for discussing the crisis by the public. "The media can play a role in calming public sentiment and contributing to public deliberation by disclosing progress and guiding public opinion in a timely manner" (Linqin, 2021, p. 838). In such an event, four elements interacted with each other: the public, the media, the crisis event (COVID-19) and third parties, such as the medical community, government agencies, educational and economic sectors, and international participants, such as the World Health Organization and international pharmaceutical companies.
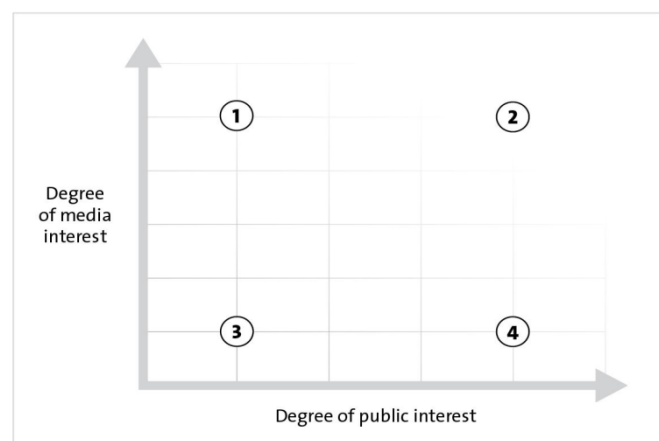

Figure 2. Relationship between the variables of the degree of media interest and the degree of public interest

When a topic or an issue reaches the peak of audience interest, this means that the topic or issue has received the attention of both the media and the public at large. Thus, the topic has reached the peak of interest in society. The question here is: How can individuals work to reduce this attention and concerns of the issue in public opinion, and move the issue from an upward path to a downward one? Figure 3 illustrates any topic or issue's usual ups and downs.
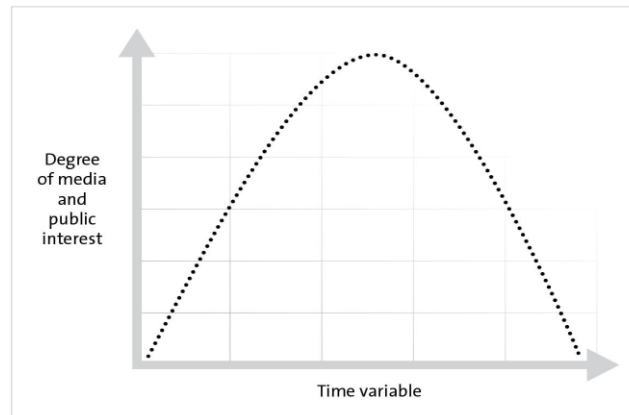
Figure 3. The ups and downs in public opinion issues

Some topics and issues of great interest may remain for a relatively long period; this period is known as the peak stage or peak stabilization (Figure 4); this stage is the most dangerous stage that an institutional entity goes through, as the crisis management teams are unable to manage the crisis, preventing a decline from the peak stage. Whenever the issue or topic stays at the peak of public opinion, the damage will be severe, and the losses will be significant regarding the material and moral levels of the institutional entity.
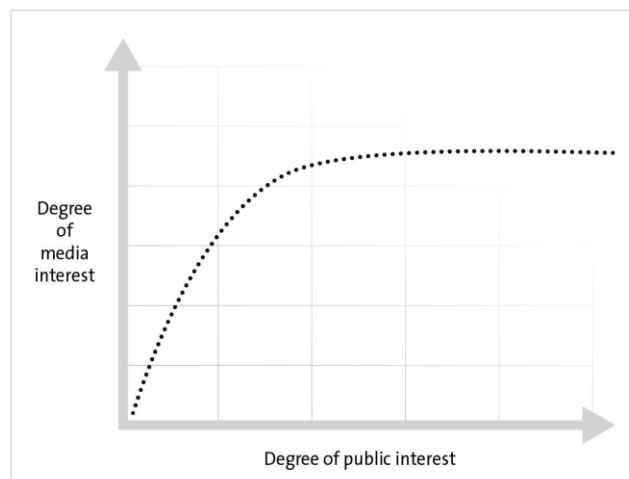

Figure 4. Peak stability of public opinion issues

There is no doubt that any topic of public opinion will eventually decline, but the question is when will it decline. There can be three paths of landing or declining, as shown in Figure 5:

A. Direct decline: This means that the decline begins when public opinion peaks. This is a success for the crisis management team in reducing the media and the public interest in the situation.

B. Late decline: This means that the crisis management teams were not able to reduce interest at the expected time, meaning the decline phase took a longer time until this decline occurred.

C. No-decline: Public opinion's interest in the issue remained stable for a very long period, as is the case for abortion in the West; each side of the issue does not want to surrender to the other side.
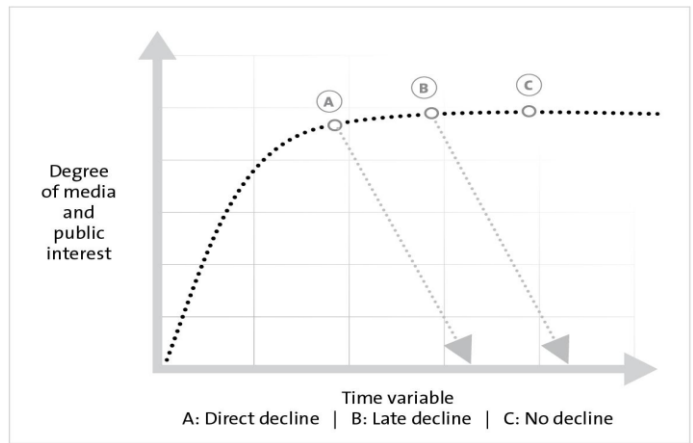
Figure 5. Paths of decline of public opinion issues

To understand the relationship between the two variables, the degree of media interest and the degree of public interest, Table 1 shows the gradual decline according to paths and stages. Undoubtedly, a topic or issue of public opinion is greatly influenced by two basic variables: the media and the audience's attitudes. Thus, the degree of interaction between the two variables could be explained as follows:

1. If the media and the audience both agree on a positive attitude toward the topic or issue, a gradual and direct decline will occur as a result of the crisis team's ability to address the media and the audience; therefore, the negative impact on the institution would disappear within a short period.

2. If the media's attitude is negative and the audience's attitude is positive, the late decline of the topic or issue in public opinion occurs. Thus, the negative attitude of the media is noted; it is dangerous for the attitudes of public opinion towards the institution to decline, despite the audience's positive attitude, which leads to a late decline. The audience's attitude remains hidden despite its positivity, while the media's attitude is apparent and dominant due to its negativity.

3. If the media's attitude is positive and the audience's attitude is negative, there will be a relatively late decline in the topic or issue of public opinion. Here, the positive attitude of the media is a critical element in reducing the damage, despite the audience's negative attitude; this leads to a relatively late decline, i.e., the media and its positive attitudes shorten the period of peak stabilization, and then the topic or issue tends to decline.

4. If the media and the public both agree on a negative attitude towards the topic or issue, public opinion can reach a level of no decline, and the stability of the peak will continue for a long time. This situation is one of the most difficult situations that an institution could face, as it places it at the peak of public opinion's attention for a long time, which is reflected in material and moral damage to the position and the image of the institution, its outputs, products, or services.

Table 1. The relationship between public and media attitudes according to the paths of decline

Variable/ attitude		Media attitudes	
		Positive	Negative
Public attitudes	Positive	Direct decline	Late decline
	Negative	Late decline (relatively)	No decline

To clarify this point, Table 2 presents a more complex process than what is stated in the previous table, as it deals with four variables at the same time (which can be called the fourth dimension). These four variables are media, social networks, third parties (with all its components), and audience. The attitude of each variable acts according to two aspects: a positive attitude and a negative attitude. At the same time, a neutral option was excluded within the values of the attitude variable to simplify the analysis and increase understanding of the equations. Within each cell of the table a diagram of the paths of rise and decline was placed based on the expected data of the four variables. The internal diagrams placed in these cells could be explained as follows:

1. Cell 1 indicates the convergence of the best results among the four variables as all of them align with positive attitudes: positivity of the media, positivity of social media networks, positivity of the third party, and positivity of the audience's attitudes. In such a case, direct decline occurs.

2. Cell 2 indicates the negativity of the media and the negativity of social media networks with the positivity of the third party and the positivity of the public; thus, the a late decline occurs. The media's negativity, with both traditional and new media, gives a longer period of stability at the peak. Still, the positivity of the third party and the audience ultimately leads

to a decline.

3. Cell 3 indicates a reverse situation compared to Cell 2, where the media and social media tend to be positive, while the third party and the audience engage in negativity towards the topic or issue; thus, a relative late decline occurs. The media and social networks, with a positive attitude towards the topic or issue, aim to shorten the stage of peak stability, which leads to a decline.

4. Cell 4 indicates the convergence of the worst possible combination of attitudes, as all four variables demonstrate negative attitude towards the topic or issue; thus, the 'no decline' stage occurs. In this case, the issue is out of the institution's control and the crisis management teams fail to solve the problem as peak stability remains unknown.

Table 2. The relationship among four variables (traditional media, social networks, third party, and audience) according to rise, stability, and decline paths

Attitude/ Variable		Traditional Media		Attitude/ Variable	
		Negative	Positive		
Public Attitude	Positive	2	1	Positive	Third Party
	Negative	4	3	Negative	
Attitude/ Variable		Negative	Positive	Attitude/ Variable	
		Social Networks			

It should be noted that there are several other options for such a table that would change according to the attitude of each of the four elements, and the internal diagram can change according to the attitude of each component accordingly. This study attempts to simplify the concept of the theory so that it can be understood without adding complications to it at the theoretical level. Therefore, not all possible alternatives have been stated in this theory. These alternatives can be known and discovered upon the actual application of the theory.

3.4 Media Messages

The media messages prepared by the institution in the form of press releases or audio-visual messages are important to the institution's image in the sphere of public opinion. Those messages create the environment in which public opinion is based according to data about the institution's attitudes towards the parties of the issue or topic. The message is an important input that determines the type, nature, and subject of the content the institution prepares. This content is determined according to the convergence or difference of attitudes between the media and the audience. Table 3 shows the contents of the institutional message during the crisis:

1. Cell 1 indicates that when the media and public attitudes are positive, the institution message should talk about "the institution " itself (its vision, mission, values, and services).

2. Cell 2 indicates that when the attitude of the media is negative, and the public attitude is positive, the institutional message should talk about "the event," as the negative media attitude results from ambiguity in the issue or topic. The institution must work to explain the event appropriately.

3. Cell 3 indicates that when the media attitude is positive and the public attitude is negative, the message should discuss "values." In such a situation, the public does not know much about the institution, its vision, or its values.

4. Cell 4 indicates that when the attitude of the media and public are negative, the institutional message should talk about "everything." This is a difficult situation for the institution. It must work in every direction, defend the institution and the

related events, and deal openly as there is nothing else to lose after this negativity of the topic or issue has been generated in public opinion.

Table 3. the contents of the media message during the crisis according to the media and audience's attitude

Attitude/ Variable		Media Attitude	
		Positive	Negative
Public Attitude	**Positive**	1 Speak on "the institution"	2 Speak on "the event"
	Negative	3 Speak on "the values"	4 Speak on "everything"

3.5 Decline Factors

Many factors can help in the process of the gradual landing of a public opinion issue or event, some of which are related to the issue, some of which are related to the audience, some of which are related to the media, and some of which are related to the parties involved in the issue. These factors must be considered when preparing a strategy to confront the crisis, including:

1. Crises or issues related to values are among the most challenging and complex topics. Therefore, values must be deconstructed as a component of the problem so that the details of the issue can be addressed. If someone faces an issue related to social values, they will find it difficult to prevail. Still, at the very least, they must focus intelligently on specific elements of the issue related to the social value.

2. Policies and procedures: Usually, the parties of public opinion on an issue seek to build new policies by introducing legislative or judicial proposals. Therefore, the institution should work to build a series of procedures that block the enaction of laws regarding the objective of the issue that it defends. To achieve this objective, it is recommended to take internal measures (within the institution) or external measures in coordination with other parties before embarking on legislative directions or regulatory policies that do not go along with the interest of the institution or company.

3. Topic deconstruction and a new map development: one must investigate the topic and create a new map consisting of their strengths and weaknesses and the opponent's strengths and weaknesses. Accordingly, they develop a strategy based on reinforcing strengths and deepening the opponent's weaknesses.

4. Differentiating between action and issue: For public relations campaigns to be successful, they must differentiate between the action and the issue. The action is usually characterized by an attempt to destabilize a specific system of a company, institution, or state. This action is generally linked to attempts to incite a riot, such as those that occur in various demonstrations in Western democracies. As for the issue, it is the origin and essence of the topic; the action may disappear, but the issue remains. International conflicts have been crowded with many actions over decades. Actions happen, and others disappear, but the issues remain. It must be noted that it is the actions that raise public opinion concerns, but it is the issues that ensure its sustainability.

5. Creating new faces: Sometimes, the public and the media are tired of some faces who are negatively associated with the issue or topic for one reason or another. Therefore, new faces should be chosen for the issue to create a new image and project a strong performance and attractiveness towards the institution.

6. The public classification: The objective of classifying the public or audience is to prepare messages for each category. The audience of any issue is usually divided into three categories: supporters, opponents, and neutrals. Messages should be prepared and directed to these three categories. When preparing a message, it should include the following:

      a. A strategic message directed to everyone.

      b. A sub-message directed to the supporting audience.

      c. A sub-message directed to the opposing audience.

      d. A sub-message directed to the neutral audience

7. Mass media: Usually, under the nature of the media's work, the media can blow the whistle and announce the issue's status and present it to public opinion, or perhaps they incite and amplify the topic for various reasons. The basic rule to start from is not to provoke the media, even if one feels the media is hostile in its coverage of the issue. The media must be perceived as if it were nothing more than a means of publishing and circulating information. The crisis team must work to address the media because of its seriousness to the course of the issue or topic. The more negative the media attitude is, the longer the crisis will last. Negative attitudes towards the media leads to prolonging the issue or topic.

8. Social media networks: Many of the elements of chaos regarding the issue or topic often stem from what social media networks publish about the topic. No framework limits these discussions, no law regulates them, and there are no reliable sources you can rely on. The social media presence remains a part of the development of the issue. The most dangerous thing about social media networks is that:

    a. They form and affect the public opinion for or against an issue.

    b. Media uses some of what is published or distributed on social media networks and reuse them again to contribute to the environment of the topic or issue. The content of these networks should not be ignored and should be included in the message plan directed to the public opinion by the institution.

9. Building a new agenda: This process is carried out through agendas inside or outside the issue. From within the situation, attention is drawn to new angles and aspects that have not been addressed; this helps the institution clarify its points of view. From outside the issue, an agenda can be created for new topics outside the context of the issue, such as developing alternatives to attract public opinion's attention to other areas.

10. Introducing third parties: The crisis management team uses other parties for aid and support, which are referred to as third parties. The institution's relationships with many parties in its organizational or social environment may suggest or invite other parties to participate in the discussion about the issue, to provide alternative views and fresh ideas.

11. Avoiding chaos: Chaos theory, as stated in this study, is any disturbance that enters the environment of the institution; it seems small at first, but grows with time; it affects all the components of the institution and its functions, and becomes a major event and crisis in the institution, just like a virus or bacteria that infects the human body. It begins to enter the body without being noticed and then spreads throughout all body organs. Hence, the institution should be alert when such disturbances enter its structure. In the event of a crisis, the crisis management team must follow up on all inputs from all parties, media, or social media networks and address them immediately.

4. Theory Requirements

This theory has requirements that help to control the paths of rise and decline so that practical data can be obtained:

1. Continuous work to conduct reviews and evaluate the status of the topic or issue in public opinion through periodic studies on media content (content analysis) and the public attitudes (survey studies or public opinion polls).

2. The theory works in an environment of major crises and events that dominate the media field and public interests, where there are essential junctures in the development of the crisis that require important repercussions for each party. Major crises also give more time to measure the paths of the crisis longitudinally. This means that the theory can be applied to any crisis if the basic elements of the crisis appear.

3. The theory places the third-party variable as a central component. It is important to take into account the legislative, regulatory, executive institutions, civil society institutions, and other parties. Therefore, within the framework of this theory, it is required to include the third party when the topic or issue builds momentum, regardless of whether the third party has a negative or positive attitude towards the work, function, and policies of the institution.

4.1 Testing the theory

There are various ways and techniques to measure public opinion. Glynn (2018) identified four methods to measure attitudes and opinions: survey research, focus groups, experimental methods, and content analysis. This theory relies on two methodologies: content analysis and survey analysis; one method cannot be sufficient to test the theory.

The crisis team should be provided with tools to conduct these studies quickly while the crisis develops. It is noted that through field experiences, the crisis team relies on quick and direct readings of reactions with or without scientific data. Hence, the procedures should be done as quickly as possible to conduct studies if the crisis persists; if the crisis has ended, the results of field studies should be provided to test the theory. Happer and Philo (2013) looked at the British media coverage of the solutions of the financial crisis of 2008. In order to know if such measures had become the attention of the media, a public poll was conducted to understand if such financial measures became a salient issue in the public. Such methodology is suitable for the present theory.

When investigating the immigration and refuge crisis in Belgium and Europe, Cononck et al. (2018) conducted an online poll with the public. As for media use, the respondents were asked about the volume of media use, how media affected them, and whether the fear of terror was affecting them. This study showed the issue of public interest that can be studied in the case of the present theory. For this theory, follow-up surveys and content analysis should be conducted as follows:

1. A follow-up content analysis should be conducted regarding media attitudes during the stages of the crisis to know the path of media coverage towards the issue or topic at major crisis junctures.

2. A follow-up content analysis on social media networks could be used to determine the public attitudes at the main junctures of the crisis.

3. A follow-up survey on public attitudes could be conducted to reflect public opinion polls regarding the issue during critical stages of the crisis or issue.

4. A follow-up survey study could be conducted on third parties' attitudes by tracking their attitudes through studying the media and social networks during the issue or topic.

Competing interests

I, the author, declare that I have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Notes: