

TRANSPARENCY OF BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS: TRUE AND OWN PERCEPTION

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PRELIMINARY COMMUNICATION / DOI: 10.20901/ms.16.32.7 / SUBMITTED: 08.09.2024.

ABSTRACT *This study examines how transparent business organizations communicate during crisis events, how prepared they are for such communication, and how their attitudes towards transparent communication have changed over a period of 10 years. A longitudinal study was conducted to determine how transparent the crisis communication of business organizations actually is and what their self-perception of transparency entails. Based on the research findings, it was determined that business organizations believe that their communication is transparent. However, the content analysis showed that it was not completely transparent, i.e., transparency declines during crisis situations, and most business organizations do not inform stakeholders about the risks associated with their business operations. Optimism regarding the progress of communication transparency in the European Union is supported by the EU Corporate Sustainability Reporting (CSR) Directive, according to which all business organizations will be required to begin reporting in 2024.*

KEYWORDS

ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSPARENCY, PSEUDO-TRANSPARENCY,
SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY, CRISIS, REPUTATION

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INTRODUCTION

Transparency has emerged as a defining principle of contemporary organizational communication and governance. In an era characterized by intensified public scrutiny, heightened stakeholder expectations, and the pervasive immediacy of digital media, transparent communication functions as both a normative ideal and a pragmatic necessity. It underpins institutional credibility, shapes stakeholder trust, and constitutes a critical component of organizational legitimacy, particularly in times of crisis, when reputational capital and public confidence are most vulnerable. Within such contexts, transparency is not merely a communicative choice but an ethical imperative and a determinant of resilience. Yet, despite its conceptual centrality, transparency remains an inherently contested and inconsistently practiced notion. Existing research reveals a recurrent gap between the rhetoric of transparency and its manifest enactment in organizational behaviour. While corporations increasingly invoke transparency as a marker of responsibility and accountability, empirical assessments often expose discrepancies between perceived openness and actual communicative performance. In the Croatian context, and specifically within the banking sector, this discrepancy has received insufficient attention. Previous studies have seldom examined the temporal evolution of transparency practices or integrated perceptions of transparency with their observable manifestations during crisis communication. This research addresses that deficiency by empirically exploring both self-perceived and actual transparency across two distinct temporal points, namely 2013 and 2021.

This study represents a longitudinal empirical investigation that replicates and extends a previously published study conducted in 2013, enabling a systematic temporal comparison of organizational transparency over time.

The research problem underpinning this study concerns the contradiction between the perceived and realized transparency of business organizations during crisis communication. The analysis seeks to determine to what extent Croatian organizations in the banking sector, a highly regulated and socially consequential domain, exhibit genuinely transparent communication behaviours, and how their orientation toward transparency has evolved. The principal objective of the study is to evaluate and compare the level and quality of transparent communication by Croatian business organizations during crises across the examined period, thereby elucidating patterns of consistency or change in both perception and practice. The research questions and following hypothesis are described under Research Rationale and Objectives section.

The scientific contribution of this research lies in its longitudinal and dual-method design, which integrates attitudinal data (survey) with content analysis to provide a multidimensional understanding of transparency as both perception and practice. By situating the Croatian experience within broader debates on organizational accountability, the study advances theoretical understanding of transparency and offers an analytical model for evaluating communicative authenticity across contexts.

RESEARCH RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

Existing scholarship offers multiple conceptualizations of transparency, yet these perspectives converge around three interrelated dimensions: informational openness, participatory engagement, and accountability. In this study, transparency is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct that integrates these dimensions into a unified analytical framework guiding the empirical analysis (Rawlins, 2009; Vujnović & Kruckeberg, 2016). Taken together, prior definitions suggest that transparency functions both as a normative principle and as a communicative practice through which organizations seek to establish trust and legitimacy. The motivation for this research arises from an interest in understanding why business organizations emphasize transparency and social responsibility in their public communication, and the extent to which such claims correspond to their actual communicative practices during crises. The central research problem, therefore, concerns the level and quality of transparency exhibited by Croatian business organizations during crises.

Previous studies have highlighted the gap between proclaimed transparency and its practical realization. Quaak et al. (2007) demonstrated that sustainability reporting does not necessarily translate into more responsible or transparent organizational behaviour. Similarly, Coombs and Holladay (2013, pp. 212–227) describe the phenomenon of “pseudo-transparency,” whereby organizations symbolically perform openness while limiting meaningful disclosure. Their notion of a “pseudo-panopticon” illustrates how transparency claims may function as impression management rather than genuine accountability. Albu and Flyverbom (2019) further argue that dominant approaches often reduce transparency to information disclosure while overlooking its organizational and communicative dynamics.

At the regulatory level, European frameworks have increasingly emphasized transparency and accountability. The Directive on non-financial reporting (Directive 2014/95/EU) and subsequent policy documents promote enhanced public disclosure on social and environmental issues. Similarly, the United Nations Global Compact underscores the importance of credible, consistent, and accessible information as a foundation of trust in an era of intensified public scrutiny (United Nations Global Compact, 2023). However, the existence of regulatory or normative expectations does not guarantee their meaningful implementation in organizational communication practices. Building on these insights, this study focuses on the distinction between perceived and actual transparency in Croatian business organizations. Its primary objective is to assess whether declared commitments to transparency and responsibility correspond to observable communication practices during crises. Transparency is examined as a communicative phenomenon manifested through publicly available messages disseminated via media channels.

Although broader debates on crisis communication increasingly address media effects and strategic communication outcomes, the present study adopts a more circumscribed analytical focus. Media are approached as communicative arenas in which organizational transparency is enacted, negotiated, or withheld, rather than as channels for measuring

audience reception or campaign effectiveness. Accordingly, the analysis of media content serves to identify how transparency is operationalized in public communication, without evaluating the impact of messages on audiences.

The primary analytical dimension of the study is temporal, focusing on changes observed between 2013 and 2021. The comparison between perceived transparency and actual communication practices is therefore treated as an analytical dimension within each time point, rather than as an independent comparative design. This approach allows the study to preserve longitudinal consistency while examining how transparency is articulated and enacted at different moments in time.

The research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do Croatian business organizations perceive their own transparency during crisis communication?
2. To what extent is their actual crisis communication transparent in practice?
3. Has the level and quality of transparency changed between 2013 and 2021?

To address these questions, two hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Crisis-related messages issued by business organizations are not proactive, complete, precise, timely, or fully understandable.

H2: Business organizations in the Republic of Croatia communicate non-transparently with users of their services and products during crises.

The empirical research focuses on business organizations operating in Croatia and examines their public communication disseminated through social media, online news portals, and the press. Hypothesis H2 is tested using a semi-structured survey instrument capturing organizational perceptions of transparency, while both H1 and H2 are further examined through systematic content analysis of published materials.

In summary, transparency is both a normative ideal and a strategic resource, and this duality underpins the study's examination of how Croatian organizations perceive and perform transparency in times of crisis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Transparency has become a fundamental component of ethical and strategic communication in contemporary organizations. It serves as a cornerstone for building and sustaining trust, credibility, and mutual understanding between organizations and their publics.

Transparency in organizational communication operates across three dimensions: (1) conceptual, ethical disclosure of accurate and timely information; (2) functional, operational traits such as proactivity, completeness, and clarity; and (3) relational, referring

to its connection to trust, credibility, and social responsibility. Together, these dimensions provide a coherent framework for analyzing transparency as both a communication practice and a legitimacy strategy.

Concept of Transparency and Its Dimensions

To sustain positive stakeholder relationships, Hon and Grunig (as cited in Jahansoozi, 2006, p. 78) identify six attributes: control, mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, and exchange and communal relationships. Rawlins conceptualizes trust through integrity, goodwill, and competence (as cited in Vujnović & Kruckeberg, 2016, p. 135). Trust, once betrayed, ceases to exist, emphasizing that organizations must communicate honestly, provide complete information, and demonstrate professional competence.

Balkin identifies three analytically distinct yet complementary types of transparency: informational, participatory, and accountability (1999, p. 393). Rawlins further refines these: information must be truthful and useful; stakeholders should participate in identifying what they need to know; and organizations must report objectively to ensure accountability (Vujnović & Kruckeberg, 2016, p. 130). Building on this, Vujnović and Kruckeberg add communicative transparency, grounded in the expectation of open, truthful dialogue (Vujnović & Kruckeberg, 2016, p. 131).

Klenke and Hanke distinguish three operational fields of corporate transparency: informational (complete and timely information), performative (trustworthy actions), and organizational (clarity about who does what and why) (as cited in Vujnović & Kruckeberg, 2016, p. 132). Jahansoozi (2007, p. 399) connects accountability to transparency, noting that identifying responsibility enhances legitimacy. However, organizations often practice transparency reactively, under pressure from stakeholders, rather than proactively. According to Plaisance "the lack of transparency is a prerequisite for all deceptive acts" (2007, p. 203).

Transparency yields tangible benefits: it mitigates corruption, enhances reputation, reduces uncertainty, and fosters stakeholder cooperation. A transparent organization gains "increased trust, credibility, cooperation with key publics, reduced transactional costs, and lowered risk premiums" (Jahansoozi, 2006, p. 81).

To institutionalize transparency, Covello and Allen (as cited in Rawlins, 2009, p. 72) propose five strategies for building credibility (1) treat the public as a partner, (2) acknowledge its concerns, (3) be open and honest, (4) collaborate with credible sources, and (5) engage the media effectively (Rawlins, 2009, p. 72). Rawlins also cites the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) as a guiding framework for consistent transparency in sustainability reporting (Rawlins, 2009, p. 72).

Pseudo-Transparency and Ethical Challenges

When adopting transparency policies, organizations face a moral choice: to be genuinely open or merely to appear so. Transparency implies the deliberate exposure of internal processes to external scrutiny (Jahansoozi, 2006, p. 80). By contrast, secrecy, as

defined by Bok (1989, as cited in Rawlins, 2009, p. 3), is the intentional concealment of information “to prevent another from learning it or revealing it”. Opacity thus threatens accountability, as “hidden influences suggest that truth is not being presented” (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2017, p. 3).

In neoliberal corporate environments, selective disclosure and information manipulation often serve instrumental purposes. Vujnović and Kruckeberg (2016, p. 128) argue that hypocrisy and misinformation can benefit corporations while distorting public understanding. They define pseudo-transparency as a strategic performance of openness, using marketing and discourse to create the appearance of transparency without genuine disclosure (Vujnović & Kruckeberg, 2016, p. 122).

Pseudo-transparency thus represents an ethical paradox: it fulfils external expectations of openness while preserving organizational control. This illusion of communication satisfies reputational demands but undermines authenticity. Coombs and Holladay's (2013) concept of the “pseudo-panopticon” describes this mechanism, whereby corporations invoke transparency to appear accountable, though actual openness remains minimal. Such practices raise moral concerns about deception and erode the foundations of trust.

Transparency in Crisis Communication and the Banking Sector

The banking sector provides a critical case for examining transparency in crisis contexts due to its systemic importance and regulatory exposure. As Douissa (2011, p. 91) explains, the Basel I framework introduced common capital standards for international banking but neglected the quality of risk management. Basel II, adopted in 2004, expanded transparency through three pillars: minimum capital requirements, supervisory review, and market discipline (Douissa, 2011, p. 92). The third pillar emphasizes public disclosure of capital adequacy, asset quality, and risk processes, reinforcing transparency as a foundation of market confidence. Bushman and Smith (2003, as cited in Douissa, 2011, p. 92) define transparency as the “availability of relevant, reliable information about performance, governance, and risk”.

Although regulation has advanced, ethical responsibility in banking remains limited. Douissa (2011, p. 97) observes that banks, compared with other industries, show less awareness of their social and environmental impacts. The Croatian experience supports this: the Swiss franc loan crisis exposed severe communication and ethical gaps, where banks often minimized disclosure.

Kundid (2012) examined socially responsible banking in Croatia, analyzing ten institutions and six CSR dimensions: business ethics, community involvement, CSR reporting, environmental awareness, financial inclusion, and partnership. Her findings show that banks equate social responsibility with philanthropy and sponsorships rather than systemic transparency. They tend to “narrate positive actions while minimizing negative information” (Kundid, 2012, p. 518). This pattern reveals an instrumental approach to communication – focused on image management rather than genuine accountability.

Transparency in banking, therefore, extends beyond regulatory compliance to moral engagement. Since stakeholders can access and reinterpret information, authenticity in communication becomes critical for sustaining reputation. In an era of social media, the public co-creates narratives about organizations; thus, selective disclosure risks amplifying distrust and reputational harm.

Crisis, Trust, and Transparency

Effective crisis communication depends on credibility and trust established before a crisis occurs (Tirkkonen & Luoma-aho, 2014; Walaski, 2011). Rizza et al. (2012) define crises as situations involving value conflicts, legitimacy challenges, and communication breakdowns. Consequently, a crisis is not only a managerial problem but also a test of ethical responsibility.

Transparency during crises directly influences legitimacy. Non-disclosure or manipulation can severely damage trust. Historical failures such as Enron and WorldCom exemplify how opacity and deceit in financial reporting can destroy corporate existence (Jahansoozi, 2006, p. 83). Following the 2008 financial crisis, banking institutions became the least trusted industry (DiStaso, 2014, p. 48). Douissa (2011, p. 92) cites Lehman Brothers as a paradigmatic case where the lack of transparency accelerated the collapse.

In the aftermath, Ernst & Young Global Limited (EY) proposed four steps to rebuild public confidence:

1. Create innovative customer experiences.
2. Personalize products and services.
3. Promote transparency through credible brand ambassadors.
4. Coordinate social media strategies to strengthen reputation (Douissa, 2011; DiStaso, 2014).

These strategies reflect a shift toward transparency as a strategic necessity, not merely an ethical ideal. In high-risk sectors such as banking, transparency functions as a reputational safeguard, a communicative insurance against uncertainty.

Ultimately, transparency, trust, and crisis management are inseparable. As public expectations of accountability intensify, organizations that rely on pseudo-transparency or selective silence risk eroding credibility. Genuine transparency, rooted in clarity, completeness, and ethical intent, emerges as both a normative obligation and a strategic imperative for sustaining legitimacy in turbulent environments.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Building on the conceptual framework and research objectives outlined in the Introduction, this study empirically investigates the relationship between perceived and actual transparency in the crisis communication of Croatian business organizations,

with a particular focus on the banking sector. To achieve this, the research employed a longitudinal mixed-method design combining survey research and content analysis. This dual approach enables both the measurement of organizations' self-perceived transparency and the evaluation of their actual communicative performance, allowing for a multidimensional understanding of transparency as both an attitude and a practice.

The two methods were applied sequentially. The survey provided insights into the subjective perceptions of transparency held by communication professionals within Croatian companies, while the content analysis offered an objective assessment of their public communication during crises. The integration of these data sources strengthened the validity of the findings and allowed for a comparative analysis between the years 2013 and 2021, highlighting potential changes in transparency orientation over time.

While the survey covered diverse Croatian businesses, the content analysis focused on banks for both practical and conceptual reasons. A cross-sector analysis was not feasible, and banking, being highly regulated and central to economic stability, offers a critical case for studying transparency, especially after the 2008–2013 financial crisis. This two-tiered design balances broad perceptions with an in-depth view of a sector where transparency is most consequential.

The longitudinal mixed-method design integrates two perspectives on transparency: perception and practice. The survey tests self-assessed communicative openness (H2), while the content analysis examines actual crisis communication (H1). Their sequential combination enables triangulation and reveals the core perception–practice gap in organizational transparency.

Survey Research

The survey was conducted on a non-probabilistic, purposive sample of 200 leading Croatian companies according to total revenue. Participants were employees working in corporate communication or public relations departments. Although 200 companies were invited to participate to provide data for a longitudinal comparison, only 32 (2013) and 34 (2021) provided valid responses, reflecting the voluntary nature of participation and typical response rates in managerial surveys. The non-response rate (approximately two-thirds of the sample) suggests possible self-selection bias, whereby organizations more confident in their communication practices may have been more willing to participate, which constitutes an important limitation acknowledged in interpreting the results.

A semi-structured online questionnaire was used as the research instrument. The 2013 questionnaire consisted of 68 questions, of which eight were used for comparison in the 2021 round. The questions examined organizational attitudes toward transparency, crisis communication practices, and perceived stakeholder trust. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Between the first and second waves of data collection, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly influenced organizational communication practices, particularly the use of digital channels and the level of public openness. These contextual changes are relevant for interpreting the differences observed between 2013 and 2021. The

collected data were analyzed using SPSS version 20.0, applying descriptive statistics, contingency tables, and correlation analysis to test the relationships between variables relevant to the hypotheses.

Content Analysis

The content analysis was conducted to verify and supplement the survey results by examining the actual communication practices of business organizations, specifically banks, during crises. The analysis included publications in the press, on news portals, and on online social networks of the selected banks.

The inclusion of 2021 in the longitudinal design, despite limited crisis communication, was deliberate. The absence of crisis-related announcements is itself analytically relevant, revealing not a lack of crises but a strategic silence, which can be interpreted as an expression of pseudo-transparency and institutional self-protection. Comparing 2015–2017 with 2021 thus clarifies how transparency evolves not only through disclosure but also through deliberate non-communication. Future research should further explore the meaning of such organizational silence.

Sample and Time Frame

The analysis covered six leading Croatian banks: Addiko Bank (formerly Hypo), Zagrebačka banka, Privredna banka Zagreb, Raiffeisen banka, Erste banka, and Splitska banka (OTP).

Two research periods were analyzed:

1. 2015–2017: a total of 365 days, divided into three intervals:
 - >1 March – 15 June 2015 (107 days),
 - >22 December 2015 – 31 May 2016 (161 days),
 - >19 December 2016 – 24 March 2017 (98 days).
2. 2021: a total of 184 days, from 1 March to 31 August 2021.

The years 2015–2017 and 2021 were selected to capture key phases in the evolution of organizational transparency after major crises. The period 2015–2017 marks regulatory adjustments and national crises, such as the Swiss franc loan issue, and 2021 represents the pandemic era and digital communication shift, allowing comparison of transparency under changing social and institutional pressures.

Units of Analysis and Corpus

Units of analysis included articles and social media posts mentioning banks, published in:

- >Press: *Jutarnji list*, *Večernji list*, *Poslovni dnevnik*, *Slobodna Dalmacija*, *Novi list*, *Glas Slavonije*;
- >News portals: *Net.hr*, *Tportal.hr*, *Index.hr*;
- >Social media: *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Forum.hr*.

Posts were monitored using the Metricom tool, which tracks frequency, keywords, and metadata (author, date, link, sentiment, and influence factor).

Data Volume

1. 2015–2017 period:

>19,205 social media posts and 2,192 press/portal publications collected;

>3,459 analyzed items (1,267 social media and 2,192 press/portal).

2. 2021 period:

>830 social media posts and 1,198 press/portal publications collected;

>1,006 analyzed items (722 social media and 284 press/portal).

Each category was operationalized through specific coding criteria (e.g., proactivity – whether communication preceded external pressure; completeness, extent of information disclosure; precision, accuracy of content; timeliness, speed of release; clarity, comprehensibility of message).

Analytical Framework

The code sheet included eight content categories for social media and 16 for press and portals (2015–2017), reduced to eight in 2021, reflecting key transparency dimensions: proactivity, completeness, precision, timeliness, and clarity. Based on Coombs and Holladay (2013), Rawlins (2009), and Vujnović and Kruckeberg (2016), transparency was conceptualized as an informational, procedural, and ethical construct and operationalized through clear coding indicators.

Two trained coders applied a detailed coding manual, achieving high inter-coder reliability (Cohen's kappa > 0.80) on a random subsample of 200 units. Statistical analyses examined transparency levels, their change over time, and their correspondence with organizational self-assessments from the survey.

FINDINGS

Results of Survey Research

The survey assessed how transparent business organizations perceive themselves to be.

As shown in Table 1, the most frequent attributes were timeliness, precision, and completeness. Respondents were asked to name five adjectives from their policy that describe transparent communication. In the research from 2013, the following results appeared most often: answers must be quick, i.e., timely (56.3%, n = 18), precise (28.1%, n = 9), available (21.9%, n = 7), understandable (18.8%, n = 6), and complete (12.5%, n = 4). The 2021 survey found that the following answers appeared most often: timely (20.6%, n = 7), honest (14.7%, n = 5), understandable (11.8%, n = 4), and precise (11.8%, n = 4). Larger discrepancies can be observed in the answers to the question of whether the business organization has a policy on transparent communication with the public, where

in 2013, 100% (n = 32) of respondents answered affirmatively, and in 2021, this percentage decreased to 70.6% (n = 24).

Table 1. Transparency of communication during a crisis

	2013		2021	
	Respondents	Share (%)	Respondents	Share (%)
<i>Does your organization have a policy on transparent communication with the public, either as a stand-alone document or as part of another document?</i>				
Yes	32	100.0%	24	70.6%
No	0	0.0%	10	29.4%
Total	32	100.0%	34	100.0%
<i>Does your organization's transparent communication policy include transparent communication during a crisis?</i>				
No answer	10	31.2%	0	0%
We don't have it	0	0%	8	23.5%
Yes	22	68.8%	23	67.7%
No	0	0.0%	3	8.8%
Total	32	100.0%	34	100.0%

In 2013, 53.1% of respondents reported that their organizations did not inform the public about business risks that could affect quality of life. In 2021, this proportion decreased to 47.1%, indicating a modest improvement of six percentage points. Although the results suggest a slight increase in transparency awareness among Croatian business organizations, the observed difference is relatively small. It may reflect variations in sample composition or respondent perception rather than a clear longitudinal trend.

During the observed period, a shift in the use of communication channels for risk communication can be identified (see Table 2).

Table 2. Which communication channels did you use to inform the public about the risks mentioned (possibility of multiple answers)?

		2013		2021	
		Resp.	Share (%)	Resp.	Share (%)
<i>National daily newspapers</i>	Yes	11	34.40%	8	23.50%
	No	21	65.60%	26	76.50%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>National radio stations</i>	Yes	8	25.00%	3	8.80%
	No	24	75.00%	31	91.20%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%



<i>National television</i>	Yes	9	28.10%	3	8.80%
	No	23	71.90%	31	91.20%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>Website of the organization</i>	Yes	13	40.60%	12	35.30%
	No	19	59.40%	22	64.70%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>Pages of the organization on social networks</i>	Yes	6	18.80%	9	26.50%
	No	26	81.20%	25	73,5%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>Intranet</i>	Yes	8	25.00%	8	23.50%
	No	24	75.00%	26	76.50%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>Internal newsletter</i>	Yes	8	25.00%	6	17.60%
	No	24	75.00%	28	82.40%
	Total	32	100,0%	34	100.00%
<i>E-newsletter for employees</i>	Yes	4	12,5%	5	14.70%
	No	28	87.50%	29	85.30%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>Bulletin boards</i>	Yes	7	21.90%	12	35.30%
	No	25	78.10%	22	64.70%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>Customer newsletter</i>	Yes	1	3.10%	1	2.90%
	No	31	96.90%	33	97.10%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>E-mail</i>	Yes	9	28.10%	10	29.40%
	No	23	71.90%	24	70.60%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>Direct mail</i>	Yes	3	9.40%	2	5.90%
	No	29	90.60%	32	94.10%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>Meetings with stakeholders</i>	Yes	8	25.00%	5	14.70%
	No	24	75.00%	29	85.30%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>Other</i>	Yes	5	15.60%	4	11.80%
	No	27	84.40%	30	88.20%
	Total	32	100.00%	34	100.00%
<i>None</i>	None			13	38.20%
	Total			34	100.00%

Resp. = Responders

It is important to note that:

- >10.9% fewer national newspapers were used;
- >There is a more significant decrease: the use of national radio stations (16.2%), national television stations (19.3%), and various meetings with stakeholders (10.3%);
- >Business organization pages on social networks are used more (7.7%);
- >There is a more significant increase in the use of bulletin boards (13.4%).

It is worth noting that as many as 38.2% of respondents in 2021 reported not using any communication channel for risk communication. Unfortunately, a comparison with 2013 is not possible because such a question did not exist. However, in 2013, when asked to give detailed answers to the sub-question “Which other communication channels did they use?”, there were no answers that would indicate any. It remains for some future research to determine at what point business organizations communicate risks and how far in advance, because this might lead to an answer about such a large share of non-disclosure of risks.

A comparison of respondents’ views on the company’s communication during the last crisis and on the information it published is presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Comparison of respondents’ views on the company’s communication in the last crisis and the information it published in 2013

	2013		p*
	How was your organization's communication during the last crisis?		
	Mostly transparent	We did not have a crisis	
<i>What information does your organization release during a crisis?</i>			
<i>We send timely and complete information about the event created in our organization to the public</i>			
	N	18	8
	%	81.8%	80.0%
<i>We only send information to the public that we are obliged to publish by law</i>			
	N	1	0
	%	4.6%	0.0%
<i>We do not publish information that we consider to be a trade secret</i>			
	N	2	2
	%	9.0%	20.0%
<i>Something else</i>			
	N	1	0
	%	4.6%	0.0%
Total	N	22	10
	%	68.8%	31.2%

*Fisher's exact test

In the 2013 survey, 68.8% answered that their organization’s communication during the last crisis was mostly transparent (Table 3). Of these respondents, 81.8% claimed that during the crisis they sent timely and complete information about the event that occurred in their organization; 4.6% stated that they sent to the public only information that they were obliged to publish by law 9% reported that they did not publish information they considered to be a business secret, and 4.6% claimed that they published something else. On the other hand, 31.2% stated that they had not experienced a crisis.

In the 2021 survey, out of a total of 34 respondents, 61.8% answered that their organization’s communication during the last crisis was mostly transparent. Of these, 76.2% claimed that during the crisis, they sent timely and complete information about the event that occurred in their organization, 14.3% stated that they sent to the public only information that they were legally obliged to publish; and 9.5% did not publish information they considered to be a business secret.

The 2021 distribution is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of respondents’ views on the company’s communication in the last crisis and the information it published in 2021

	2021	How was your organization's communication during the last crisis?			p*
		Mostly transparent	We informed only the competent state institutions about the event	We did not have a crisis	
What information does your organization release during a crisis?					
<i>We send timely and complete information about the event created in our organization to the public</i>					
	N	16	0	5	
	%	76.2%	0.0%	45.5%	
<i>We only send information to the public that we are obliged to publish by law</i>					
	N	3	1	0	
	%	14.3%	50.0%	0.0%	
<i>We do not publish information that we consider to be a trade secret</i>					
	N	2	1	1	
	%	9.5%	50.0%	9.1%	
<i>Something else</i>					
	N	0	0	5	
	%	0.0%	0.0%	45.5%	
Total	N	21	2	11	0.001
	%	61.8%	5.9%	32.3%	

*Fisher's exact test

Observing both periods, it can be noted that there are no major deviations when it comes to transparent communication during crises. However, the difference between 68.8% in 2013 and 61.8% in 2021, referring to respondents who stated that their communication during the last crisis was mostly transparent, suggests that it is a possibly distorted perception among respondents.

In the 2013 survey, a total of 15.6% of respondents claimed that they either sent to the public only information required by law or withheld information they considered to be a business secret, whereas in 2021, an increase is observed i.e., 23.5% of respondents claimed this practice.

In a survey from 2013, as many as 81.3% of respondents claimed that they sent timely and complete information about the event to the public during a crisis. In 2021, a decline was recorded, with only 61.8% reporting that they sent timely and complete information. Therefore, it can be concluded that these answers primarily record respondents' perceptions, which tend to overestimate the transparency of their organizations' communication.

Content Analysis of Online Social Networks

Table 5. Topics on which banks communicated most frequently on official online social networks

Topics – all <i>online</i> social networks	From 2015 to 2017		2021	
	No. of posts	Share (%)	No. of posts	Share (%)
Promotion of products and services	515	40.7%	335	46.4%
Other (business of the company, accounts of citizens)	318	25.1%	191	26.5%
Corporate social investments	167	13.2%	115	15.9%
Citizen loans	80	6.3%		
Credit cards	75	5.9%	3	0.4%
Housing loans	40	3.2%	1	0.1%
Business loans	20	1.6%	2	0.3%
Cannot be determined	19	1.5%		
Employment in banks	13	1.0%		
Internet theft	5	0.4%		
Housing savings of citizens	4	0.3%		
CHF loans	4	0.3%		
Human potential	3	0.2%	12	1.7%
Monitoring of directors in the Republic of Croatia	3	0.2%		
Internet security	1	0.1%	15	2.1%
Dissatisfied client			47	6.5%
Cash loans			1	0.1%
Total	1267	100.0 %	722	100.0%

As shown in Table 5, the dominant themes were promotion, business operations, and corporate social investment. The paper specifically analyzes the following crises: housing loans in Swiss francs, the Hypo affair, Raiffeisen cooperatives, and internet theft. As an activity of banks in the period from 2015 to 2017, announcements were recorded for two of the crises – housing loans in Swiss francs and internet theft – while in 2021, no such announcements were identified. In the 2021 research, there was a significant increase in communication with unsatisfied clients about internet security. However, since there were no publications addressing the identified crisis topics in 2021, there were no elements enabling further analysis of crisis communication on online social media.

Analysis of Press Content

Content analysis investigated total number of press releases, the topics addressed by banks in the press, the number and type of communication tools used, and the extent to which crisis-related publications were proactive, reactive, timely, precise, understandable, and complete, as well as whether communication was legally prescribed or restrained, and which crises were discussed proactively and which reactively.

From the results presented in Table 6, it can be concluded that from 2015 to 2017, the categories “cannot be determined” and “other” accounted for a very high proportion of press items compared to other categories, comprising 66% of all press items.

Table 6. Topics on which banks communicated most frequently in the press

Topics – press	From 2015 to 2017		2021	
	No. of press items	Share (%)	No. of press items	Share (%)
Cannot be determined	676	45.3%		
Other (business of the company, accounts of citizens)	308	20.7%	39	95.1%
CHF loans	122	8.2%		
Promotion of products and services	100	6.7%		
Corruption	50	3.4%		
Citizen loans	48	3.2%		
Corporate social investments	40	2.7%		
Housing loans	26	1.7%		
Human resources	23	1.5%		
Business loans	23	1.5%		
Credit cards	18	1.2%		
Hypo affair	11	0.7%		
Housing savings of citizens	10	0.7%		
Internet theft	9	0.6%		
Evictions	8	0.5%		
Internet security	7	0.5%		

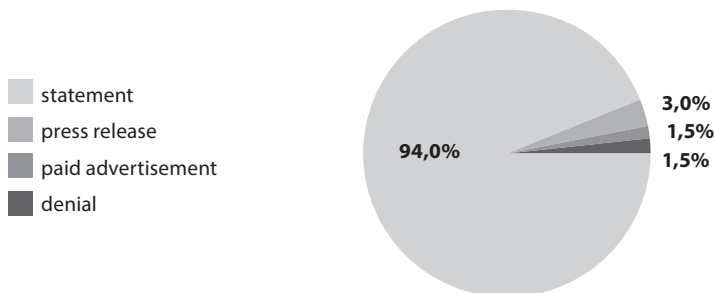


Topics – press	From 2015 to 2017		2021	
	No. of press items	Share (%)	No. of press items	Share (%)
Several elements equally represented	5	0.3%		
Employment in banks	4	0.3%		
Monitoring of directors in the Republic of Croatia	2	0.1%		
Blocked accounts of citizens	1	0.1%		
Lost court case (Spaladium Arena, Split)			2	4.9%
Total	1491	100.0%	41	100.0%

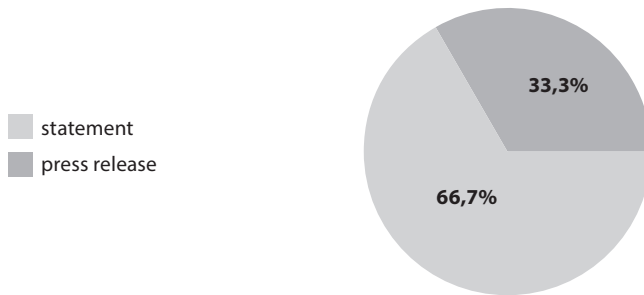
This indicates an exceptionally high number of press items unrelated to topics relevant to this research. Press items on loans denominated in Swiss francs accounted for only 8.2% of the total, despite their high relevance to citizens, followed by items related to the promotion of products and services (6.7%), Crises (loans in Swiss francs, the Hypo affair, internet theft, internet security, evictions, monitoring of directors in the Republic of Croatia, blocked accounts of citizens), which are the subject of this research, were represented in 160 press items (10.7%).

In 2021, the share of press items classified as “cannot be determined” increased substantially to 95.1%, while 4.9% referred to a new crisis topic, namely the lost court case in Split concerning the construction of the Spaladium Arena. No press items in 2021 addressed the crises that were the focus of this research.

Figures 1 and 2 show the results of the content analysis of the communication tools used by banks during crisis communication in the press.



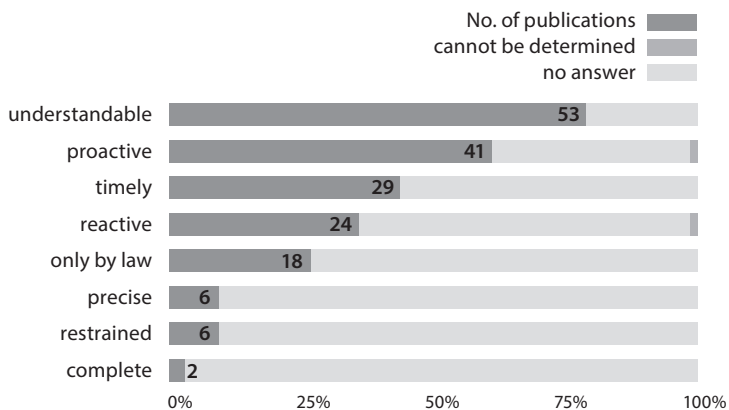
▲ Figure 1. Communication tools of banks in the press (2015 to 2017)



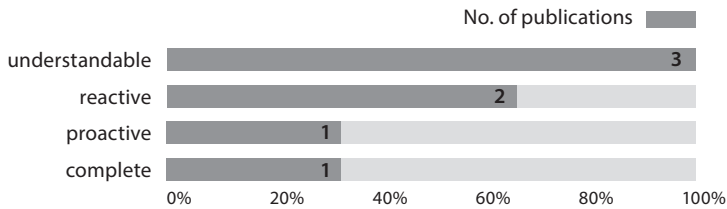
▲ Figure 2.
Communication tools of banks in the press (2021)

Figure 1 illustrates the 2015–2017 pattern. During the aforementioned crisis communication, that is, from 2015 to 2017, banks used four communication tools in their communication according to daily newspapers: press releases (3.0%), paid advertisements (1.5%), denials (1.5%), and statements (94.0%), with a total of 67 occurrences (Figure 1). In 2021, communication was limited to press releases (33.3% for the rest) and statements (66.7% for the lost court case in Split for the construction of the Spaladium Arena). Figure 2 presents 2021 data.

The research aimed to determine the proactivity and openness of banks towards the target public. However, the messages that business organizations sent were supposed to be precise and complete in order to demonstrate responsibility and credibility, thereby building positive relationships.



▲ Figure 3.
Communication of banks in the press during the crisis – from 2015 to 2017 (N=67)



▲ Figure 4.

Communication of banks in the press during the crisis – 2021 (N=3)

According to Figure 3, banks’ statements published during crises from 2015 to 2017 were most often comprehensible (79.1%) and proactive (61.2%), while only 9.0% were rated as precise, 9.0% as restrained, and only two statements (3.0%) were complete.

According to Figure 4, the statements of banks in crisis in the press in 2021 were comprehensible (100.0%) and reactive (66.7%). and 33.3% were assessed as complete and proactive.

Banks were proactive during crisis communications, but they need to improve their transparency. The results indicate that communication cannot be characterized as timely, complete, and precise, which is not enough for transparent communication. Therefore, this communication may be described as secretive.

Analysis of News Portal Content

In the research conducted from 2015 to 2017, most topics (57.6%) were classified as “other” (business of the company, accounts of citizens), followed by housing loans in Swiss francs with 10.3% (Table 7).

The largest proportion of topics falls under the categories of “other business” and “loans”, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Topics on which banks communicated the most on news portals

Topics – news portals	From 2015 to 2017		2021	
	No. of news items	Share (%)	No. of news items	Share (%)
Other (business of the company, accounts of citizens)	404	57.6%	179	73.7%
CHF loans	72	10.3%	3	1.2%
Corporate social investments	43	6.1%	9	3.7%
Citizen loans	40	5.7%	8	3.3%
Business loans	38	5.4%		
Hypo affair	35	5.0%		

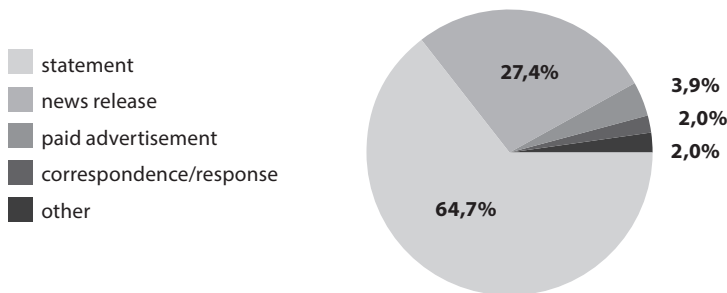


Promotion of products and services	18	2.6%	29	11.9%
Several elements equally represented	12	1.7%		
Credit cards	8	1.1%		
Housing loans	8	1.1%	8	3.3%
Employment in bhumananks	8	1.1%	4	1.7%
Human resourcesl	4	0.6%	1	0.4%
Monitoring of directors in the Republic of Croatia	4	0.6%		
Internet security	2	0.3%		
Raiffeisen cooperatives	2	0.3%		
Blocked accounts of citizens	1	0.1%		
Evictions	1	0.1%		
Housing savings of citizens	1	0.1%		
Lost court case (Spaladium Arena, Split)			2	0.8%
Total	701	100.0 %	243	100.0%

Interestingly, “corporate social investments” are in third place with 6.1%, while “promotion of products and services” makes up only 2.6% of news items on news portals. Crisis-related topics (housing loans in Swiss francs, the Hypo affair, monitoring of directors in the Republic of Croatia, Internet security, Raiffeisen cooperatives, blocked accounts of citizens, and evictions) accounted for 117 texts (16.7%) in 2017-2018, while in 2021, only three texts (1.2%) with crisis-related topics were published. Most of these topics are currently awaiting court verdicts and are written about less frequently or only occasionally in the media.

In the research conducted in 2021, most topics (73.7%) were also in the category “other”, the category “promotion of products and services” increased significantly (11.9%), and “corporate social investments” remained in third place, 3.7%.

Figure 5 presents an overview of the analysis of the content of news items of communication tools used by banks during crisis communications on news portals from 2015 to 2017.



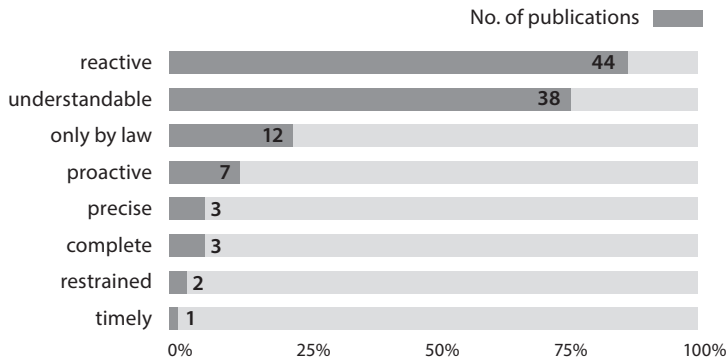
▲ Figure 5.
Communication tools of banks on news portals – from 2015 to 2017

From 2015 to 2017, banks used five communication tools to communicate with news portals: statement, news release correspondence/reply, paid advertisement, and others – a total of 51 times. They most often gave statements to news portals (64.7%), which also mostly published their news releases (27.4%) (Figure 5).

In 2021, banks used only one communication tool, the statement, a total of 17 items.

The findings demonstrate a progressive narrowing of banks’ communication practices on news portals, culminating in exclusive reliance on statements by 2021. This shift reflects a move away from diversified and potentially dialogic communication toward standardized, low-risk formats. Such simplification limits opportunities for proactive engagement and reduces the depth of information available to the public. Consequently, crisis communication on news portals appears to be driven primarily by reputational protection and legal compliance rather than a commitment to transparency.

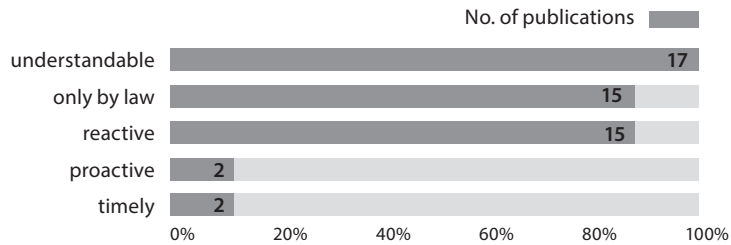
Investigating how transparent the banks’ crisis communication on news portals is the content of the news items was analyzed according to the same attributes as for the press.



▲ Figure 6.
Communication of banks on news portals during crises – from 2015 to 2017 (N=51)

Investigating the transparency of banks’ crisis communication on news portals, the content of news items was analyzed using the same attributes as for the press.

Statements published on news portals from 2015 to 2017 during the crisis (Figure 6) were most often reactive (86.3%) and understandable (74.5%). However, only 5.9% were assessed as precise, the same proportion as those evaluated as complete, and only one statement (2.0%) was considered timely. In 2021 (Figure 7), the most common statements were understandable (100.0%) and reactive (88.2%), with communication largely limited to legally required disclosures. Communication in this period was the least proactive and timely (11.8%). No statements were evaluated as complete or precise.



▲ Figure 7.
Communication of banks on news portals during crises – 2021(N=17)

When comparing the level of proactive versus reactive communication on news portals across the observed crises, 13.7% of announcements from 2015 to 2017 were assessed as proactive communication, while 86.3% as reactive. In 2021, a similar pattern was observed, with 88.2% of statements categorized as reactive and only 11.8% as proactive. When the results of proactive communication with reactions are examined, it can be concluded that banks predominantly relied on reactive communication during crises and that they need to improve transparency. As with press communication, it cannot be concluded that banks responded to crises in a timely, complete and precise manner.

Although the number of crisis-related announcements was small, this absence itself is analytically significant, indicating strategic silence and selective disclosure rather than genuine transparency.

DISCUSSION

Perceived Transparency

Survey results indicate a decline in formal transparency policies between 2013 and 2021. While all organizations in 2013 reported having such policies, in 2021, only 70.6% confirmed their existence, and 67.7% their application during crises. This suggests a shift toward pseudo-transparency, in which formal commitments are weakly implemented or maintained primarily at a symbolic level.

These findings are particularly relevant given the growing regulatory emphasis on transparency in sustainability and risk reporting, raising questions about whether compliance leads to substantive openness or remains largely formal.

Transparency in Risk Communication

Most organizations did not disclose business-related risks with potential impacts on quality of life. Communication relied primarily on official websites, with a modest increase in social media use by 2021. However, this change reflects technological adaptation rather than improved transparency, as communication remained largely one-way.

The decline in direct stakeholder engagement and the increased reliance on digital mediation indicate that changes in communication formats did not translate into greater openness. Longitudinal differences should therefore be interpreted cautiously.

Actual Transparency: Content Analysis

The content analysis revealed a clear gap between perceived and actual transparency. While messages were generally understandable, they were rarely proactive, complete, or precise.

Across media types, crisis communication was predominantly reactive and legally minimalist. In 2021, the absence of crisis-related communication on official social media pages points to strategic silence rather than transparency. These findings confirm H2 and partially support H1.

Explaining the Transparency Gap

The transparency gap reflects the persistence of pseudo-transparency, driven by reputational concerns, regulatory compliance pressures, and risk-averse organizational cultures. Transparency is often performed symbolically, while substantive disclosure remains limited.

In crisis contexts, these tendencies intensify, making omission a strategic communicative choice rather than an exception.

Implications and Outlook

The results indicate that transparency in crisis communication remains largely compliance-driven. Bridging this gap requires proactive risk disclosure, sustained stakeholder dialogue, and stronger ethical integration within organizational communication practices. Future research should examine whether emerging sustainability reporting frameworks promote substantive transparency or merely reproduce symbolic practices.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the transparency of business communication within Croatian organizations during crises, with particular attention to the divergence between perceived and actual transparency. Drawing upon a longitudinal design spanning 2013 and 2021, and employing both survey and content analysis, the research provides empirical evidence of a persistent disjunction between organizations' self-perceptions and their demonstrated communicative conduct.

The findings show that organizations largely perceive themselves as transparent, timely, and comprehensible in crisis communication. Yet detailed content analysis indicates that such communication often lacks proactivity, precision, and completeness.

Although messages were generally comprehensible, they seldom met the qualitative standards of genuine transparency. The longitudinal comparison further suggests that, despite technological and regulatory developments, substantive improvement has been limited, particularly in areas such as formal transparency policies and voluntary risk disclosure; some regression is detectable. This incongruity illustrates the endurance of illusory transparency, in which proclaimed openness serves symbolic rather than substantive functions.

The findings highlight the need for organizations to embed transparency as an operational norm rather than a performative claim. Communication professionals should emphasize dialogic engagement and proactive disclosure mechanisms that strengthen stakeholder trust under uncertainty. Developing comprehensible crisis communication protocols, supported by ethical guidelines and internal accountability systems, is essential for narrowing the gap between proclaimed and enacted transparency. The forthcoming sustainability-reporting obligations within the European regulatory framework present an opportunity to integrate transparency into corporate governance, transforming it from a symbolic aspiration into a measurable standard of conduct.

Future research could broaden the empirical scope beyond the banking sector to include cross-industry and cross-national comparisons, enabling a deeper understanding of how cultural, institutional, and regulatory variables influence transparency. Methodologically, subsequent studies may apply mixed method designs with larger datasets, real-time digital monitoring, and longitudinal modelling to capture the evolving nature of transparency in crises. Further attention should also be given to organizational silence as a communicative manifestation of pseudo-transparency.

In sum, this study reaffirms that transparency is both a normative ideal and a strategic necessity in contemporary organizational communication. Authentic transparency depends not on the volume of information disclosed but, on the coherence, credibility, and ethical intent with which information is communicated, especially in crises that most acutely test the integrity of corporate discourse.

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TRANSPARENTNOST POSLOVNIH ORGANIZACIJA: STVARNO STANJE I SAMOPERCEPCIJA

Žanina Žigo

SAŽETAK Ovaj rad ispituje kako poslovne organizacije komuniciraju tijekom kriznih događaja, njihovu pripremljenost za takvu komunikaciju te promjene u stavovima o transparentnoj komunikaciji tijekom desetogodišnjeg razdoblja. Provedeno je longitudinalno istraživanje kojemu je cilj bio utvrditi koliko je zapravo transparentno krizno komuniciranje određenih poslovnih organizacija te kako one same ocjenjuju svoju transparentnost. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju kako poslovne organizacije vjeruju da komuniciraju transparentno. Međutim, analiza sadržaja upućuje na to kako komunikacija nije u potpunosti transparentna, odnosno da se razina transparentnosti smanjuje u kriznim situacijama te da većina poslovnih organizacija ne informira dionike o rizicima povezanim s poslovanjem. Optimizam u pogledu napretka transparentnosti komunikacije u Europskoj uniji podupire Direktiva Europske unije o korporativnom izvještavanju o održivosti (engl. corporate sustainability reporting, CSR), prema kojoj su sve poslovne organizacije bile obvezne započeti s izvještavanjem 2024. godine.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

ORGANIZACIJSKA TRANSPARENTNOST, PSEUDOTRANSPARENTNOST,
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