Introduction
Through the Internet, diverse communities, once separated by distance, are now able to converge instantaneously. These immediately connected publics, using their capacity to communicate rapidly and easily, are hastening the pace of crisis communications. As a result, communicators are turning to the Internet to disseminate their information quickly and directly. Posting news releases, fact sheets, and presentations to their web sites, organizations are combining traditional crisis communications tactics with the web’s new information distribution methods. Are these organizations, though, taking advantage of all that the Internet offers them?

A crisis can be defined as the interaction of human, organizational, and technological failures that combine with regulatory, infrastructure, and preparedness shortcomings in the organizations’ environments (Penrose 157). Crises can include hurricanes, sewage spills, product tampering, or any other events threatening an organization’s reputation and/or welfare. Crises require prompt, open communication to stakeholders, which, according to Sturges (308), can include

- Instructing information, which tells stakeholders how they should physically react to the crisis
- Adjusting information, which helps stakeholders to psychologically cope with the crisis’ magnitude
- Internalizing information, which assists stakeholders with formulating an image about the organization

One third of all Americans or 70.5 million adults are Internet users. Of the 70.5 million, more than 20 million regularly log on to the Internet for their news (Dilenschneider 15). To meet the increasing demands of this connected public, according to research studies, organizations are using the Internet to communicate crisis information. Perry, Taylor, and Doerfel (216), by sampling news summary pages from CNN.com and MSNBC.com over 18 months, found that 64% of the organizations facing a crisis during their study responded using their web sites. United Airlines and American Airlines, when dealing with the 9-11 disaster and a public hungry for information, used their web sites to provide an immediate response to the attacks (Greer and Moreland 436).
While research indicates growing use of the Internet as a crisis communications tool, little evidence exists that organizations are taking full advantage of the unique qualities online crisis response offers. The Internet’s interactive features, such as online chat, electronic bulletin boards, and threaded dialogue, provides organizations with a means for identifying tactical options for responding to a crisis (Perry, Taylor, and Doerfel 229). A study of six banking web sites during the Y2K crisis (DiNardo 376), though, found that the banks used the web more for information dissemination than information gathering, providing early evidence that organizations weren’t taking full advantage of the Internet.

Taylor and Perry (214), in a more recent study, found that organizations still appear to be more comfortable with posting news releases to a company web site, than using interactive communication tools during a crisis. In 2003, Greer and Moreland (436) noted that neither United Airlines nor American Airlines used their web sites’ interactive features extensively during their response to the 9-11 disaster. While their web sites became a central clearinghouse for disaster related information, United and American primarily employed traditional public relations tactics, such as posting news releases online, for crisis information distribution. Kent and Taylor (322) agree that organizations are failing to use the Internet’s advanced communications tools. They argue, though, that in failing to use the Internet as an information gathering tool, organizations are missing the opportunity to build a “dialogic relationship” with stakeholders.

**Problem**

A review of the literature indicates that use of the Internet by organizations experiencing a crisis is more prevalent than ever. In addition, it is also understood that organizations are using the Internet to disseminate crisis information rather than gather it. What research does not reveal is why these organizations are failing to take advantage of the Internet’s interactive features. Does implementing and managing a tool such as online chat require more time and personnel on the part of public relations staff? Will online chat, threaded dialogue, and electronic bulletin boards only occur on web sites hosted by organizations with sizeable (those with a staff of 5 or more) public relations departments?

This study will attempt to determine if the driving issue behind an organization’s failure to use the web’s interactive features during a crisis is a lack of personnel.
Research Question
Are larger public relations departments more likely to use the Internet’s interactive features to disseminate and gather information during a crisis?

Hypothesis
A strong relationship will exist between an organization’s use of the Internet’s interactive tools to communicate during a crisis and the size of the organization’s public relations department. The large public relations department will have used the Internet’s interactive tools at least once to communicate to stakeholders during a crisis.

Variables
- Participants [List of attendees of the 2006 National Hurricane Conference who have the title of Public Information Officer]
  - Organization size
  - Public relations department size
  - History of crises in the organization represented by the participant
  - Participant familiarity with technology
  - Audience for crisis communications [that is, does the audience for the crisis message use the Internet?]

- Treatments
  - Survey, questions for focus group, and questions for telephone interviews

- Criterion
  
The study, using triangulation to confirm results, will employ a survey, a focus group, and telephone interviews during the three data-gathering phases.

Outcomes
Participants working for large public relations departments will have used the Internet’s interactive features to communicate at least once during a crisis. Participants working for smaller organizations will have never used the Internet’s interactive features during a crisis.

Definition of Terms
Crisis: The interaction of human, organizational, and technological failures that combine with regulatory, infrastructure, and preparedness shortcomings in the organizations’ environments (Penrose)

Small Public Relations Department: The small public relations department will consist of up to four full time public relations personnel.

Large Public Relations Department: The large public relations department will consist of five or more full time public relations personnel.

Online Chat: Ability for numerous people to "talk" to each other via the Internet in "realtime," similar to a room full of people talking

Threaded Dialogue: A sequence of responses to an initial message posting, all carried out over the Internet

Electronic Bulletin Board: A shared web site or board where users can post and respond to messages online

Subsequent Research
Exploring the use of the Internet for crisis communications is a complex issue that requires more in-depth study. For example, if this research indicates that size of the public relations department does affect use of Internet, subsequent research can be used to identify a threshold, if one exists, between the size of the public relations department that does not use the Internet’s interactive features during a crisis and the size of the department that does use the Internet’s two way tools. In addition, the size of an organization’s information technology department may also be a contributing factor to whether or not the web’s interactive features are used during a crisis. Finally, this research focuses solely on public sector public relations. Further study regarding the use of the Internet’s two way capabilities by the private sector will broaden research findings.

Design
Qualitative research will be used to determine if the size of a public relations department portends its use of the Internet’s interactive features to gather information during a crisis.

This study will consist of three phases:

**Phase 1:** A one-page survey questionnaire will be mailed to attendees of the 2006 National Hurricane Conference who hold the title of Public Information Officer for their organization.

**Phase 2:** A focus group of approximately ten survey respondents will be convened to further explore reasons behind the use of the Internet’s two way features to disseminate information during a crisis.

**Phase 3:** One-on-one interviewing of approximately five focus group members will be used to confirm the survey and focus group findings.
Works Cited


