Teaching Crisis Communication Through a Simulated Press-Release Scenario with and Without AI Support

Introduction / Need for Innovation

As artificial intelligence (AI) tools rapidly enter professional communication workflows, undergraduate agricultural communications students must learn to evaluate the strengths and limitations of AI-generated content (Zerfass et al. 2020). Yet few instructional models provide opportunities for students to compare their own writing to AI outputs within realistic, discipline-specific scenarios such as crisis communication (Martin et al. 2025). This innovative activity was developed for a writing-intensive agricultural communications course where students are expected to develop a stronger understanding of crisis communication messaging. The intervention integrates hands-on scenario creation, collaborative decision-making, and a structured comparison of human-written and AI-assisted press releases (Oates & Johnson, 2025). It is designed to strengthen students' technical writing skills, ethical reasoning, and critical awareness of AI use within agricultural communication contexts.

How It Works / Methodology / Program Steps

This classroom activity was designed to help students critically examine the role of artificial intelligence in high stakes agricultural communications, specifically crisis response. On the first day of the activity, students collaboratively created a realistic crisis scenario rooted in agricultural teaching and processing environments. As a class, they developed a fictional incident in which an undergraduate student enrolled in a Meat Science class discovered that she had lost an earring during the processing and packaging, raising concerns about a potential food safety violation. Students worked together to establish key contextual details, including the specific class session and time of processing, the volume of the product packaged, how many units had already been sold, and what information the college's marketing and communications team would reasonably have now the issues was identified.

On the second class, students applied this scenario to a simulated crisis communication task. They were divided into three writing conditions: one group drafted a full press release using AI assistance, another group wrote a press release without AI, and the instructor provided a press release to model expert-level decision making and professional judgement. Once completed, the press releases were reviewed during a blind critique by an external group of agricultural communicators. The reviewers read each release aloud and attempted to determine which texts were AI-assisted, which were written by students and created by the instructor. Feedback focused on tone, clarity, professionalism, and the use of appropriate risk-management language within an agricultural context.

The activity concluded with structured debrief and discussion. Students compared the strengths and limitations of each writing approach and demonstrated the risks of relying too heavily on crisis messaging, particularly in situations involving food safety, liability, and public

trust. Conversations emphasized the importance of precision and accountability in agricultural communication and reinforced the idea that AI can serve as a support tool, but not a replacement for human expertise and ethical responsibility.

Results to Date / Implications

The outcomes of the innovative classroom activity demonstrate that students gained a stronger understanding of crisis communication opportunities within agricultural systems and developed increased awareness of AI's limitations related to factual accuracy, tone and discipline specificity. Engagement levels were high throughout the class sessions, which could potentially be attributed to the realism of the student-generated scenario. The blind review revealed that AI-assisted press releases often sound over polished but lacked agricultural and organizational specificity. While student-written releases may more accurately reflect institutional voice but sometimes struggle with structure to provide insight into the benefits of human crafted press releases. Students reported that comparing the releases side-by-side alongside the external team's decision helped clarify the necessity of human oversight in agricultural communication and food-system related messaging.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future iterations of this activity will expand the existing structure to deepen students' understanding of crisis communication and ethical AI use. Planned additions include a stakeholder-mapping component in which students develop adapted messaging for multiple audiences, such as faculty, parents, media outlets, and consumers. A misinformation of management will also be introduced, requiring students to respond to a fictional viral social media post related to the crisis. In addition, a reflective writing component will be incorporated to prompt students to think more intentionally about ethical surroundings of AI usage in high stakes agricultural communication contexts.

For others interested in implementing this activity, several key ideas should be taken into consideration. Allowing students to co-create the crisis scenario is essential, as this approach increases both buy-in and realism. When evaluating AI-generated content, instructors should emphasize accuracy and agricultural context, particularly when critiquing language related to food safety and risk management. Using a blind review process is also recommended as it encourages meaningful discussion and critical reflection without the pressure of grades or judgement.

Costs/Resources Needed

This activity requires no financial cost beyond unless you want to purchase subscriptions to high level AI models. Recommended resources include access to AI platforms such as ChatGPT, Claude, or Canva AI for a portion of the class. The involvement of a visiting communications professional to conduct the blind review which would require coordination prior to class.

References

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Martin, A. F., Tubaltseva, S., Harrison, A., & Rubin, G. J. (2025). Participatory co-design and evaluation of a novel approach to generative AI-integrated coursework assessment in higher education. *Behavioral Sciences*, *15*(6), 808. https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15060808.

Zerfass, A., Hagelstein, J., & Tench, R. (2020). Artificial intelligence in communication management: A cross-national study on adoption and knowledge, impact, challenges and risks. *Journal of Communication Management, 24*(4), 377–389. https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-10-2019-0137.