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Communicating During Crisis: A Case Study of the 2010 BP Gulf Oil Spill

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Abstract

Crisis communication is an integral aspect of public relations that can have either positive or negative repercussions based upon the action that an organization responds. The manner in which an organization handles a crisis determines financial implications that may ensue, public perception and reputation of the organization, as well as the overall success or failure of the organization in the future. Consequently, Timothy Coombs asserts that the best crisis communication practice is to respond quickly, accurately, and consistently (Coombs, 2010: 28). Other scholars concur and add supplementary techniques which emphasize preparedness and responsibility.

The present study was conducted to identify models of best practices for crisis management and to apply these models to analyze the effectiveness of BP's response to the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill. A content analysis of 164 articles from three newspapers, *The Times Picayune, The New York Times, and The Herald* (United Kingdom), was conducted to examine how BP responded to the crisis in the Gulf, as well as to compare differences in coverage of the crisis and response among the three newspapers.

Results reveal that BP's response incorporated both best practices of crisis communication, as well as crisis responses that could be categorized as unethical. Such unethical responses included evasion of responsibility, denial, and scapegoating, while effective crisis communication tactics consisted of updating the public in a clear, concise manner. Further results and implications for international crisis communication practices will be described.

CHAPTER ONE: RATIONALE

Introduction to Crisis Communication

Crises are inevitable. It is the manner in which an organization handles such crises that determines how the public will respond. When an organization's negligent actions cause harm to humans, the environment, or the economy, public outrage is unavoidable and deserved. Therefore, it is in an organization's best interest to react responsibly in order to prevent future harm. No matter how much an organization prepares in advance for a crisis or how efficiently it responds after a crisis has occurred, the possibility of reputational damage or serious financial loss still exists. Therefore, crisis communication in the field of public relations is an area that is essential to the success of any organization. Understanding how to plan for and effectively manage crises is pivotal.

A contemporary example of a crisis facing an organization is the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. This particular crisis began on April 20, 2010 with an explosion and fire on the BP-licensed Transocean drilling rig Deepwater Horizon, followed two days later by the sinking of the Deepwater Horizon rig and reports of a five-mile-long oil slick. On April 24, oil was officially found leaking from BP's well in the Gulf, spawning a flurry of governmental, environmental, and media attention. Over the course of several months, the government, scientists, environmentalists, and Gulf residents fought to combat the leaking well and reduce the impact that the constant flow of oil would have upon the economy of the Gulf and the ecology of the area. Meanwhile, BP executives struggled to respond to the crisis appropriately, protect corporate stock and profits, manage changes in leadership, prepare for inevitable litigation, as well as salvage its public reputation. After waging a full-on battle with the well, BP announced that it was officially sealed on September 19, but not without continued scrutiny from a critical

public audience (Alter, 2010; Casale, 2010; Crowley, 2010; Dudley, 2010; Gandel, 2010; Gray and Walsh, 2010; Guardian.co.uk, 2010; Hayes, 2010; Houck, 2010; Klein, 2010; Nijhuis, 2010; Smith, 2010; Weber, 2010).

The BP oil spill serves as the focus for the present study, as it offers a contemporary case for viewing corporate crisis communication in action. Before corporate crisis communication can be studied empirically, however, it is important to understand this topic more broadly: to define and describe what constitutes a crisis and its stages; to outline relevant theoretical frameworks; and finally, to provide a rubric for identifying unethical and ethical crisis communication practices.

Defining a Crisis

In order for an organization to engage in crisis communication, it must first understand what a crisis entails. In *The Handbook of Crisis Communication,* W. Timothy Coombs defines a crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2010: 19).

According to Coombs, there is no universally accepted definition of crisis; and while many other definitions of crisis exist, some commonalities are prevalent in all definitions. Extant research reveals that a crisis includes some degree of uncertainty, regarding when it will arise and what the outcome will be. L. Barton in *Crisis in Organizations II* defines a crisis as "an incident that is unexpected, negative, and overwhelming" (Barton 2001: 2). Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer concur that a crisis unexpected, and add that a crisis is often perceived as a threat to an organization's goals (Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer 1998: 233). Additionally, research shows that

a crisis disrupts normal business within an organization, as well as threatens its reputation and financial livelihood (Coombs, 2007: 1; Jaques, 2007: 147-148; Williams and Olaniran: 6). Crises have also been referred to as "turning points" for organizations due to the pervasive impact that they can have upon operations and livelihoods (Fink 1986: 15; Regester 1989: 38).

Coombs points out that crises can have either positive or negative outcomes and that "opportunity and threat are more a function of the outcomes of crisis management rather than a defining characteristic of crisis" (Coombs, 2010: 18-19). This relates to his understanding of crisis, crisis management, and crisis communication as interconnected and progressive terms. Coombs asserts that the crisis must come before crisis management, which in turn is followed by crisis communication (Coombs, 2010: 17-18). Crisis management is defined by Coombs as "a set of factors designed to combat crises and to lessen the actual damages inflicted," as well as seeks to minimize negative effects upon the organization and stakeholders (Coombs, 2010: 20). Preventative measures, crisis management plans, and post-crisis evaluations are integral components of crisis management, which can be divided into pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis stages (Coombs, 2010: 20).

An aspect of each stage of crisis management is the acquiring and publicizing of information surrounding the crisis, which can be considered crisis communication. Coombs broadly defines crisis communication as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs 2010: 20). Actions regarding crisis communication can be understood within the three categories of crisis management. Crisis communication in pre-crisis includes "collecting information about crisis risks, making decisions about how to manage potential crises, and training people who will be involved in the crisis management process" (Coombs 2010: 20). During the time of an actual crisis, crisis

communication entails collecting and processing information surrounding the crisis in order to make a decision about what course of action to take, along with the creation and dissemination of messages to the public regarding the situation. "Dissecting the crisis management effort, communicating necessary changes to individuals, and providing follow-up crisis messages" comprises crisis communication during the post-crisis stage (Coombs 2010: 20).

Understanding the relationship between crisis management and crisis communication is essential in order to enact preventative measures against crises, to devise a plan of action for when crises arise, to execute effective strategies to remedy crises, as well as to evaluate the effects of crises and decisions made along the way. Furthermore, knowledge regarding the array of crises that may develop, underlying theories to guide crisis management, and effective and unsuccessful crisis communication and management strategies is beneficial in order to react to crises in such a manner that is advantageous for an organization's stability and reputation, as well as for the public.

Types of Crises

As crisis communication has developed as a field of study within public relations, a typology has emerged. Hearit and Roberson list several types of crises in the *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication.* These include allegations, crises in public perception, natural disasters, product or service crises, terrorist attacks, economic crises, human resource crises, industrial crises, oil and chemical spills, transportation disasters, scandals and illegalities, accidents, product safety incidents, and social irresponsibility (Hearit and Roberson, 2010: 543-545). For each type of crises, different crisis management and communication strategies should

be employed. In order to understand which tactic would be most effective in remedying the crisis, it is important to understand what each particular type of crisis entails.

According to Ware and Linkugel, an allegation is "an attack on a person's character," but it can also be applied to an entire organization when a claim or accusation is made regarding the organization, its decisions, or its reputation (Ware and Linkugel 1973, 274). Furthermore, an allegation may be brought against an individual or organization, which may prove to be true or false. Because it is based in assertions and can be detrimental to an organization if false allegations are brought against an organization, Ware and Linkugel assert that this type of crisis seems "to demand a direct response" (Ware and Linkugel 1973, 274). Roper claims that allegations jeopardize an organization's legitimacy, as the public is unsure of the truth of the situation. "Defense of actions or statements that have impugned and organization's legitimacy must be addressed quickly if an organization is to survive," according to Roper (Roper, 2005). Hearit argues that if allegations brought against an organization are true, "a corporate apologia, which is a 'response to a social legitimization crisis,'" may prove effective in restoring the organization's image within the public sphere (Hearit 1995: 3).

Another type of crisis described in the *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication* is scandals and illegalities. Hearit and Roberson claim that this form of crisis "refers to those incidents in which there is a violation of a social code," such as an executive whose private indiscretion has drawn negative attention to the entire organization or involved legal attention (Hearit and Roberson 2010: 544). Because guilt is generally contained to a small group of individuals, Hearit and Roberson assert that scandals and illegalities "often can be dealt with cleanly and directly" (Hearit and Roberson 2010: 545).

Accidents are another type of crises discussed by Hearit and Roberson. Accidents entail

an unexpected outcome, in which "lives are lost or the environment is despoiled" (Hearit, 2001).

The example of the infamous *Exxon Valdez* oil spill is described.

Hearit and Roberson contrast the dramatic occurrence of accidents with more long-term

product safety incidents, which unfold gradually over time. According to Hearit and Roberson,

most of these product safety incidents involve legal action, in which organizations that are

named in class action lawsuits have an evident "need to defend their reputation" (Hearit and

Roberson 2010: 545).

Another type of crisis that is discussed in the *Handbook of Risk and Crisis*

Communication is social irresponsibility. During this crisis, "corporate actors are seen to act in

ways that violate publicly held social values, speak in politically incorrect ways, or have

otherwise behaved in such a way as to give fuel to special interest or advocacy groups looking to

'make an issue' with their enemies" (Hearit and Roberson 2010: 545). Handling crises of social

irresponsibility is similar to management of scandals and illegalities, which also violates social

codes, and can be dealt with in a direct approach. Furthermore, Burnett adds to this list with

specific types of industrial crises, which include sudden market shifts, top management

succession, hostile takeovers, regulation/deregulation, and adverse international events (Burnett,

1998: 478).

Major Theoretical Models Guiding Crisis Communication

In addition to the classification of crises, theories have been developed and applied to

guide crisis communication. The most prominent theories emerging in research include

attribution theory, situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), contingency theory, and

apologia.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

According to Coombs, attribution theory is a social-psychological theory that "attempts

to explain how people make sense of events," especially why they occurred (Coombs 2010: 37).

This theory explains how people attribute responsibility based on limited evidence, tending to

attach blame to a specific person involved in an event (internal) or to environmental factors

(external) (Coombs, 2010: 37). According to Bernard Weiner, during crises, this theory is

evident when stakeholders attribute crisis responsibility upon either the organization itself or

external factors, which in turn affects behaviors directed toward the organization on behalf of the

public (Weiner, 1986). This relates to the way in which an organization may evade responsibility

in a crisis situation, as well as the perception that the public develops of the organization based

on the degree to which the organization accepts responsibility (and how quickly it chooses to do

so). Jolly and Mowen assert that in crisis situations, "the perception of social responsibility in the

response is facilitated by a fast response and the government commenting that this response was

socially responsible" (Jolly and Mowen 1985; Mowen et.al. 1981). Additionally, Bradford and

Garrett claim that "the nature of the crisis situation influences the effectiveness of the response"

with the public being more forgiving of a less socially deemed severe crises (Bradford and

Garrett, 1995).

Directly associated to attribution theory is situational crisis communication theory

(SCCT), which claims that attributions made by stakeholders affect how they interact with the

organization (Coombs 1995; Coombs and Holladay 1996; Schwartz 2008). This is an audience-

centered theory that aims to explain public perception and behavior during crises. As the public develops perceptions of the manner in which the organization accepts or evades responsibility during a crisis, the organization's reputation is threatened (Barton 2001; Dowling 2002). Coombs asserts that crises have the potential to "generate negative affect and behavioral intentions toward an organization" (Coombs 2010: 38).

SCCT describes factors that the public takes into consideration when forming their approval or disproval of an organization's social responsibility and management of a crisis. Coombs explains that the initial step is determining crisis type, as well as level of attributions of crisis responsibility and threat posed by a crisis. These three types include: victim (low crisis responsibility/threat), accident (minimal crisis responsibility/threat), and intentional (strong crisis responsibility/threat) (Coombs 2010: 39). The second step of SCCT perception formulation occurs when the public considers the two intensifying factors, crisis history and prior reputation (Coombs 2010: 39). If the organization has a past history and reputation that is prone to crisis mismanagement, attitudes and perceptions of the organization among the public will likely suffer, as will the organization's reputation.

SCCT also explains the role that behavioral intentions and moods/emotions play in crisis outcomes and public perception of an organization's crisis management efforts. A concept that emerges regarding behavior intentions is negative word-of-mouth. When the public is disappointed, angered, or does not support action, or lack of action, taken by an organization during a crisis, individuals begin "relaying negative messages to others about the organization in crisis," which further harms the organization's reputation (Coombs 2010: 39-40).

Additionally, SCCT purports that there are four primary crisis response strategies, which include denial, diminishing, rebuilding, and reinforcing (Coombs 2010: 40). Under this theory,

denial strategies "attempt to prove the organization had no responsibility for the crisis," whereas diminishing strategies acknowledge that the organization is somewhat responsible but "seek to minimize the organization's crisis responsibility and/or reduce the perceived seriousness of the crisis" (Coombs 2010: 40). Rebuilding strategies "seek to improve perceptions of the organization through compensation and/or apologies" (Coombs 2010: 41). Meanwhile, reinforcing strategies "try to add positive information about the organization by praising others (ingratiation) and/or reminding people of past good works by the organization (bolstering)" (Coombs 2010: 41).

Contingency Theory

Instead of focusing on the public's perception of an organization during crises, contingency theory, attempts to describe the organization's approach when dealing with its stakeholders during crisis. The pivotal variable of contingency theory is stance, which Coombs defines as "how an organization responds to competition and conflicts with other parties" (Coombs 2010: 42). These stances are placed on a continuum, ranging from pure advocacy to pure accommodation, depending on the circumstance (Cameron, Jin, and Pang, 2010: 528, 533; Coombs, 2010: 42). In this context, "advocacy is when an organization argues for its own interests, while accommodation is when the organization makes concessions to the other parties" (Coombs 2010: 42). An organization's choice to enact advocacy or accommodation strategies varies depending upon a particular crisis and the context in which it takes place. Additionally, contingency theory is rooted in over 80 other variables that "help predict what stance should be used in a particular situation" (Coombs 2010: 42). Variables can be classified as either predisposed, which represent default stances, or can be situational variables, which are in turn

divided into five external factors and seven internal factors (Shin et al. 2006). Contingency

theory hinges on the relationships between these variables in understanding the stance and action

an organization assumes during a crisis.

Apologia

Apologia is a rhetorical framework that directs crisis communication strategies. Effective

apologia is used to restore damaged credibility and occurs when an organization apologizes to

the public and involved parties, as well as takes responsibility for the crisis. Corporate apologia

is executed by an organization to defend its reputation and restore social legitimacy, which is the

"consistency between organizational values and stakeholder values" (Coombs 2010: 30).

According to Hearit in *Crisis Management by Apology,* an ethical apology must be truthful,

sincere, timely, voluntary, address all stakeholders, and is performed in an appropriate context

(Hearit 2006: 64).

Furthermore, Fediuk, Coombs, and Botero address audience perception of a crisis.

Fediuk, Coombs, and Botero assert that crisis incidents that are perceived as personally relevant

lead to greater cognitive processing of the crisis on behalf of the public (Botero, Coombs, and

Fediuk, 2010: 643). They claim that individuals will perceive a crisis as more severe when it

results in a large amount of damage, as well as when it is perceived to impact personal goals

(Botero, Coombs, and Fediuk, 2010: 643).

Crisis Stages and Implications

While there may be several different theories and strategies to guide crisis

communication, extant research shows that there are only three main stages that construct the

crisis communication model. These three stages are pre-crisis planning and preparation (preventative), crisis response and management (active), and post-crisis repair and learning (reflective) (Burnett, 1998; Coombs, 2010: 20; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Jaques, 2007: 155-158). These stages are important to consider, as effective communication strategies should differ as a function of the crisis timeline.

The pre-crisis phase is anticipatory and preventative in nature and includes scanning the environment for potential risks and possible crises (Coombs 2010: 26; Burnett 1998; Penrose, 2000). According to Coombs, "early identification permits time for analysis and strategizing" (Coombs 2010: 26). After scanning the environment, preventative planning takes place, which includes establishing information and warning systems, as well as assigning roles and responsibilities, testing and training of crisis communication plans, and conducting simulations (Burnett, 1998; Coombs, 2010: 26; Jaques, 2007: 155-158).

The second phase in the crisis communication model is response to and management of the actual crisis. During this phase, a crisis management response is chosen and implemented, damage is mitigated, as well as stakeholders and the media are informed and managed (Jaques 2007: 156). This phase also entails targeting messages to the public and handling any negative publicity in order to salvage reputation (Burnett 1998).

The last phase in the model is the post-crisis phase, which is reflective and includes continuation of crisis communication, reputation repair, and organizational evaluation and learning (Coombs 2010: 45-46). During the post-crisis phase, operational recovery, financial costs, share price protection, and business momentum are addressed, as well as any litigation or injury or death investigations managed. The media and the public should be continuously informed and the manner in which the crisis was handled is scrutinized and evaluated.

Additionally, the crisis communication plan is adapted and implemented for future use if necessary (Jaques 2007: 157-158).

Action and Strategies in Crisis Communication

According to Sellnow, when crises do strike, organizations follow one of three general paths: inaction or no response, routine solutions that draw upon pre-crisis planning, or original solutions that are created specifically for a crisis (Sellnow, 1993: 31). Sellnow and Seeger assert that "while routine responses to crisis, such as blaming and firing individuals, can salvage an organization's legitimacy, original solutions that signal change within an organization can 'enhance a perception of preventative, long-term change and renewed social legitimacy'" (Sellnow and Seeger, 1989: 17). This claim implies that original solutions, created specifically for a particular crisis, may serve as the best path of action.

Unethical Crisis Management

Within these three overarching options are a variety of strategies that may be executed by an organization facing a crisis. While it is in an organization's best interest to respond ethically in a time of crisis, many practices that organizations employ are unethical. Research reveals that such unethical strategies include attack of the accuser, denial, scapegoating, justification, compensation, ingratiation, victimage, evasion of responsibility, framing, bolstering, minimization, differentiation, transcendence, as well as mortification and staged apology (Benoit, 1997; Canel and Sanders, 2010; Coombs, 2007; Falkenheimer and Heide, 2006: 9; Maresh and Williams, 2010: 286).

In order to comprehend how these tactics could be perceived as unethical or could be potentially detrimental to an organization, it is necessary to understand their meanings. According to Coombs in "Crisis Management and Communication," attack of the accuser occurs when the organization or crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming that something is wrong with the organization. Denial occurs when the organization under fire asserts that no crisis exists. When scapegoating takes place, the organization or crisis manager blames an individual or group outside of the organization for the crisis.

Rather than turning to external sources, justification occurs when the organization tries to minimize the perceived damage caused by the crisis by claiming or attempting to prove that a particular act or response was reasonable. Minimization also seeks to downplay the seriousness of an act or response conducted in order to ensure that public perception of such act or crisis is more favorable. Differentiation attempts to minimize the offensiveness of a particular act or crisis as well by comparing it to other similar crises or responses that are assumed to be much more unethical or poorly managed (Benoit, 1997; Canel and Sanders, 2010; Coombs, 2007; Falkenheimer and Heide, 2006; Maresh and Williams, 2010).

Ingratiation, another unethical crisis communication response, can be understood as an organization's effort to gain favor with the public through deliberate efforts, particularly by portraying itself and its actions in a positive light in order to gain favor/support among others. Closely related to ingratiation is bolstering, which occurs when an organization emphasizes its good actions or responses, as well as its past history with crisis and its reputation, in order to overshadow bad responses (Benoit, 1997; Canel and Sanders, 2010; Coombs, 2007; Falkenheimer and Heide, 2006; Maresh and Williams, 2010).

Victimage, which is another PR strategy that can be considered unethical, occurs when the organization in the midst of a crisis portrays itself as the victim of a particular crisis rather than accepting any degree of responsibility for it. This ties in with evasion of responsibility, in which an organization may claim that their response to the crisis was in response to another act (provocation), that a particular event occurred because a lack of information or ability (defeasibility), that an act or the crisis as a whole was a mishap (accident), or that an act or response was originally executed with good intentions. In any of these instances, the organization offers an excuse or rationale for their decisions, responses, or actions rather than accepting responsibility for them or the crisis (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007).

Transcendence is another unethical crisis communication strategy in which an organization draws attention to particular issues that are considered more important in order to justify an act or response pursued during a crisis. This is done to downplay a negatively perceived act by framing it in reference to other acts or responses considered more worthy or important (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007; Falkenheimer and Heide, 2006).

Three other crisis communication strategies, mortification, compensation, and staged apology, may be perceived as beneficial tactics for an organization to perform, yet when examining each closer, crisis communication scholars have found these strategies typically are executed with unethical intentions. Compensation, or reimbursing victims of the crisis, may be the right course of action to take from a legal standpoint, but this strategy can be regarded as unethical when money is given instead of a true apology by the organization, as well as can serve as a form of evasion of responsibility. Mortification occurs when an organization expresses regret for a specific act or response and asks forgiveness, yet does not accept responsibility or apologize for the entire situation or crisis as a whole. With this strategy, an organization

acknowledges its wrongdoing or mistake regarding a particular act, but still evades responsibility

for the crisis and fails to offer an apology. In some instances, organizations will execute a staged

apology (Benoit, 1997; Canel and Sanders, 2010; Coombs, 2007; Falkenheimer and Heide, 2009;

Maresh and Williams, 2010). While issuing an apology seems ethical, when an organization

does so to mislead or create sympathy for itself to divert public attention, it is disingenuous and

unethical.

Best Practices for Crisis Communication

While many unethical options exist and are frequently used by organizations in crises,

extensive research has been conducted to determine best practices in crisis communication as

well. These are agreed-upon practices that are not only effective in managing crises, but also are

ethical. Coombs asserts that the best crisis communication practice is to respond quickly,

accurately, and consistently (Coombs, 2010: 28). Failing to respond quickly "lets others provide

the information that will frame how the crisis will be perceived by stakeholders," (Coombs 2010:

28) which "allows others to control the crisis" (Brummett 1980). Accuracy and consistency

should be utilized in order to build credibility in the midst of crisis. Coombs claims that

"inconsistencies create confusion and make crisis managers appear to be incompetent" (Coombs

2010: 29).

Other scholars concur and add the following: select and maintain a central spokesperson,

build relationships and trust with the public, as well as with the media, acknowledge mistakes,

take public fear and perceptions into consideration, construct and train a crisis handling team

within the organization, practice simulations of crises, convey the organization's message in a

clear, concise way, sincerely show sympathy and concern, keep stakeholders and the public

updated on recovery efforts, and analyze management of the crisis and learn from the experience (Ashcroft, 1997; Burnett, 1998; Coombs, 1997; Coombs 2010; Covello, 2010: 150; Heath, 2006; Maresh and Williams, 2010: 290; Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer, 2007; Vigso, 2010).

Furthermore, Covello adds that relationships with the media, as well as a comprehensive risk communication plan should be developed in advance (Covello, 2010: 150). Covello also asserts that "a briefing book should be prepared in advance with answers to the most frequently asked questions by reporters" and that answers to these questions should be prepared "in accordance with the principles of message mapping" (Covello, 2010: 150). In "Best Practices in Crisis Communication: Evolution of Practice through Research," Robert Heath claims that exhibiting honesty, candor, and openness, meeting the needs of the media and remaining accessible, being committed to serving as the first and best source of information, and delivering messages of self-efficacy all constitute what he considers to be best practices for managing and communicating during crises (Heath, 2006: 245-248).

Effective crisis communication also hinges on the communication skills of the leader of an organization or an elected spokesperson. According to Covello, successful leaders in the midst of crisis "listen to, acknowledge, and respect the fears, anxieties, and uncertainties of the many public and key stakeholders; remain calm and in control; take ownership of the issue or problem; are visible or readily available; continually look for opportunities to repeat the prepared key messages; acknowledge uncertainty; as well as seek, engage, and make extensive use of support from credible third parties" (Covello, 2010: 151-152).

International Crisis Communication

Crises are not limited to domestic affairs alone, but rather are often international in scope. While the basic theories, strategies, and best practices in crisis communication may be applied to international crises, there are other aspects that must be taken into account that are frequently overlooked. Falkenheimer and Heide explain that context is often more important than the message itself in global crisis communication. However, context varies depending on language and culture. This means that in international PR, messages may be skewed or unintentionally misunderstood. Falkenheimer and Heide also assert that during crises, ethnic differences seem to escalate (Falkenheimer and Heide, 2006). Additionally, Taylor adds that international organizations need individuals from host nations to act as "cultural interpreters" in order to explain the cultural and societal norms of their home countries. Taylor also claims that it is vital for organizations to avoid ethnocentrism in their communication strategies with international publics (Taylor, 2000). Understanding that crisis communication should be conducted differently depending upon the context and location in which it is enacted is beneficial and relevant to the present study as BP is a British owned corporation, yet the oil spill occurred on U.S. territory.

Management of Previous Crises: An Analysis of the Exxon Valdez Case

In addition to considering effective international crisis communication strategies, it is also useful to examine how previous crises have been managed, especially those that are similar in nature to the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill. A crisis communication analysis of the Exxon Valdez oil spill, which occurred off the coast of Alaska in March 1989 was examined as a comparative backdrop for BP's crisis communication following the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in U.S. territory (Anderson, 2002; Eng, 2010; CBS News, 2010; Juhasz, 2010; Kahn, 2010;

Mulkern, 2010; Widener and Gunter, 2007). It is apparent that Exxon did not follow the essential best practices mentioned above. Johnson and Sellnow (1995) argue that Exxon's initial response was not timely or thoughtful enough. However, Exxon did take a proactive approach, discouraging increased government regulation of oil transportation, citing it as unnecessary and potentially dangerous. This attempt to protect assets was clearly stated in Exxon's communications. In a speech seven months following the incident, W.D. Stevens, President of Exxon Company U.S.A., implied that the event occurred due to "human imperfection" and that Exxon was fully capable of cleanup. Related to its stance that government regulation was unnecessary, Stevens portrayed Exxon as a victim of government bureaucracy. Stevens' speech was an attempt to salvage Exxon's image, as well as avoid policy changes restricting oil transportation. Furthermore, Johnson and Sellnow assert that "the concept of accountability is critical for maintaining a positive public image" (Johnson and Sellnow, 1995: 60). However, it is obvious that Exxon did not take full responsibility for the crisis and engaged in unethical crisis communication strategies including denial, scapegoating, justification, and evasion of responsibility.

Contemporary Application: A Content Analysis of BP's Response to the 2010 Gulf Oil Spill

This thesis seeks to determine, in part, if BP's crisis management shows any indication of "lessons learned" from the Exxon disaster. Understanding the definition of crisis communication, as well as what theories guide effective crisis communication strategies both domestically and internationally, is essential to the study of organizational crises. This knowledge provides a framework through which BP's response to the Gulf oil crisis was examined.

Specifically, to analyze in what ways contemporary crisis communication practices have evolved since the Exxon Valdez incident, a content analysis was conducted of media coverage regarding BP's response to the 2010 Gulf oil spill. According to the agenda setting theory of the press, individuals often form their perceptions or view of a particular topic based on information disseminated through the media, as well as how such a topic is represented or framed. This theory postulates that the media have a profound impact upon audiences and their beliefs by their choice of what stories are considered newsworthy, as well as how much prominence is given to them. The manner in which a topic is portrayed in the media and the amount of importance bestowed upon it through salience and space, shapes how the public perceives its significance and relevance (McCombs, 2005: 156-169). Agenda setting theory of the press applies to the content analysis conducted in this study as it examines how BP and its response to the Gulf oil spill was represented within the media, in this case newspapers, in regard to prominence (page location and article length), salience, and public perception of BP's reputation and capabilities.

For this content analysis, three publications, a local Gulf newspaper, the *Times-Picayune;* a U.S. domestic newspaper, the *New York Times,* and the United Kingdom's *Herald*, were studied and compared in order to determine differences in their portrayal of BP, BP's particular responses to the 2010 Gulf oil spill crisis, and if such responses were effective and ethical.

Research Questions Guiding Content Analysis

R1: What was the nature of media coverage, in terms of BP's oil spill crisis response, as

portrayed in the United Kingdom's *Herald,* in the *New York Times,* and in New Orleans,

Louisiana's the *Times-Picayune?*

R2: What types of sources were cited or quoted in articles about the 2010 Gulf oil spill and BP's

crisis response within the United Kingdom's *Herald,* in the *New York Times,* and in New

Orleans, Louisiana's the *Times- Picayune?*

R3: What were the primary topics addressed in articles about the 2010 Gulf oil spill and BP's

crisis response within the United Kingdom's *Herald,* in the *New York Times,* and in New

Orleans, Louisiana's the *Times- Picayune?*

R4: What response strategies did BP engage in during different stages of the crisis?

R5: Is there evidence that BP engaged in unethical crisis communication; if yes, what are the

most frequently used unethical strategies?

R6: Were there significant differences in the BP oil spill coverage as a function of the news

source?

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

Method

Content Analysis

To answer the proposed research questions, a content analysis was performed. A content analysis is a systematic, valid, and reliable method used to evaluate specific media content (Krippendorf, 2004; Neuendorf, 2002; Weber, 1990). For this study, a content analysis was employed using three newspapers to evaluate BP's response to the 2010 Gulf oil spill, as well as to compare disparities in media coverage among the newspapers. Guidelines for performing this content analysis were drawn from Krippendorf's *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology* (2004).

Sample Inclusion Rules and Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis for this study was newspaper articles found in the United Kingdom's *Herald,* the *New York Times,* and New Orleans, Louisiana's *Times-Picayune.* Articles for analysis that fit the criteria (see article inclusion rules below) that were published over the course of four months from April 21, 2010 through September 19, 2010 were selected for analysis. This represents the time frame of the BP oil spill crisis. A census sample of articles from all issues and sections of the three newspapers during selected time periods of this time frame (see below) were included in the study, as they comprised a fair sample of media coverage of the crisis.

Because BP is a foreign-owned company, yet the oil spill occurred in U.S. territory, an international and two domestic newspapers were examined in this analysis. The medium-sized United Kingdom's *Herald* was selected as BP is a British owned corporation, anchored in the United Kingdom. Although the crisis itself took place within the United States, BP's global stock

and profits, as well as corporate executives and employees were affected. An international perspective of the crisis was sought to include an external source with vested interest that was affected by the crisis.

The *New York Times* was selected for this study as it is the third largest circulated newspaper and the largest paid subscriber newspaper in the United States. For this study, it was important to examine a large domestic national newspaper in order to compare media coverage with the small local Gulf newspaper, the *Times-Picayune.* A broader, yet still domestic perspective was sought for comparison, especially in regard to prominence and salience given to the 2010 Gulf oil crisis and BP's response.

New Orleans, Louisiana's *Times-Picayune* was selected for analysis as it represents a newspaper from a region directly affected by the oil spill. Oil reached the shores of Louisiana and the New Orleans region as early as the end of April. This newspaper was chosen as it is located within an affected region of the Gulf, yet has medium-sized circulation, and therefore, has the potential to shape widespread perceptions of the public within the Gulf area. A local perspective was sought in order to capture how citizens of the Gulf region, Gulf businesses, tourism to the Gulf, as well as the environment and overall economy of the Gulf were impacted by the oil spill and BP's response.

Articles examined in this content analysis were selected from the time that BP announced that an explosion had occurred on its Transocean Deepwater Horizon rig and that oil had begun to leak from its well on April 20 through the official statement that the well had been sealed on September 19, five months later. Unlike other environmental crises which often can be limited to a specific action or event, the crisis examined in this study was continuous over the course of several months. Due to the large amount of media coverage that this crisis was given throughout

the five-month period, articles included in this study were chosen from dates considered "spikes" in media coverage.   Articles for this study were obtained from the online database LexisNexis using the search phrase "BP and oil spill."

A spike in media coverage was determined by examining the BP oil spill timeline of events (Guardian.co.uk) and by observing an increase in the number of articles written, as revealed in the newspaper database LexisNexis. For the purposes of this study, a "spike" was considered a positive correlation between a cluster of events and an increase in media coverage of these events. A spike included a time frame in which several events occurred simultaneously, such as President Obama visiting the Gulf, former BP CEO Tony Hayward being replaced, and the successful implementation of a valve to stop oil flow. A cluster, such as the one described, generated an increase in media coverage, and therefore, can be considered a "spike." Articles included in this content analysis that represented major media spikes are from the following six time periods: April 20 to May 5, May 26-30, June 18-26, July 21-29, August 21-28, and September 18-23. Within each of these spikes, no single act or comment was the sole reason for an increase in media coverage, but rather several clusters of events or incidents triggered media coverage. For example, during the spike from July 21-29, BP admitted to using Photoshop to exaggerate the level of activity at the Gulf oil spill command center, Tropical Storm Bonnie halted oil clean-up in the Gulf, Deepwater Horizon alarms were revealed to have been switched off at the time of the explosion to allow workers to sleep, and it was announced that BP Chief Executive Tony Hayward would be stepping down from his leadership position. All of these events culminated to lead to an increase in media coverage, which is considered a "spike" in this study. Other dates selected as spikes were similar in nature to this example.

In order to obtain the final sample, relevance was determined, with all irrelevant or repeated articles excluded. Irrelevant articles included those from wire services, briefs with short synopses of various aspects related to the oil spill and BP's response, repeated articles, as well as those with content that was not related to the study and guiding research questions. For example, the BP oil spill might have been mentioned in an article regarding Tropical Storm Bonnie. While BP was mentioned once, the article focused on preparation for the storm. The final sample for this content analysis was comprised of 164 articles.

Coding Instrument and Definitions of Variables

In order to answer the research questions and conduct this study, a coding instrument was developed and refined by the researcher. The instrument was developed by reading sample articles pertaining to this particular oil spill, as well as previously occurring ones, in different newspapers than those used in this study. This procedure was followed in order to determine primary topics, sources, and other categories reflected in crisis literature that would relate to the 2010 BP oil spill. The instrument was tested on approximately four articles not included in the final study by the principal researcher and the researcher's advisor to establish initial internal reliability of the instrument and to determine whether to add or exclude variables based on their relevance (exhaustive categories). Discussion and revisions were made after the coding of each article until the coding instrument appeared to be valid and reliable and to reflect the range of content that would be assessed.

Logistical information was first coded for each article including the origin of each article (what newspaper it appeared in; the *Times-Picayune* = 1, the *New York Times* = 2, the *Herald* = 3), as well as the year (2010), month (1-12), and date (1-31) the article was published.

Prominence given to the article was measured by several variables. Such variables included the section of the newspaper that the article was published, the page number that the article was found on, and the word count of the article. These variables were included to measure the amount of importance given to each article, as well as the perceived significance that the public may draw from the length and location of the article. Because of the limitations with using archived articles from LexisNexis, other elements indicating prominence, such as article location on page (above or below the newspaper fold), presence of photograph or graphic, or size of headline, could not be assessed. Agenda setting theory purports that articles with greater word count or those that are placed in the front (or news) section of the newspaper are perceived to possess newsworthy qualities, and therefore, are regarded as more important by the public.

Crisis stage was also coded in this study. Stages (1-6) correlated with the "spike" in which the article was located. Stages included the following: April 20 to May 5 (stage 1), May 26-30 (stage 2), June 18-26 (stage 3), July 21-29 (stage 4), August 21-28 (stage 5), and September 18-23 (stage 6).

Another variable tested in this content analysis was sources cited or quoted within the article. Sources are also integral to prominence as credibility, and in turn, importance is attached to certain types of individuals, such as the President of the U.S. or BP executives. Categories for this variable included: BP company spokesperson, BP company official/executive, BP employee, U.S. government official or agency, U.S. President, U.K government official or agency, U.K. Prime Minister, Local (Gulf) official, engineer, environmental scientist, environmental activist, economist, citizen of the Gulf region, industrial or trade organization, Gulf business leader/owner/manager, tourist of the Gulf, health expert, veterinarian/animal scientist, emergency response worker, coast guard, and other. Refer to Appendix B for definitions of these

categories. It is also important to note that categories within this variable were not mutually

exclusive. For example, an oceanographer from the Environmental Protection Agency was coded

as both an environmental scientist and as a U.S. government agency. This was done so that all

citations or quotations would be coded; yet expertise in a particular area would be recorded as

well. If the source was present in an article, it was coded with a 1, if it was not present, it was

coded with a 2.

Additionally, topics addressed within each article were coded. "Topics addressed" was

created as a variable in order to determine the purpose of each article, as well as the scope of

information being covered by the newspapers in regard to the 2010 Gulf oil spill and BP's

response. Categories for this variable included: impact on land, water, and/or plant life; impact

on humans and/or animal life; clean-up processes or attempts to stop the spill; government

comment, government action/policies; human interest; economic impact on Gulf tourism and

local (Gulf) businesses; economic impact on BP stock and profits; economic impact on other

national/international businesses or industries; comment made by BP; reported action taken by

BP regarding management of the spill; criticism of BP's crisis management response; and other.

Refer to Appendix B for definitions of these categories. For this variable, an article could contain

more than one topic or category. If a topic was present in the article, it was coded with a 1. If a

topic was not present, it was coded with a 2.

Using these same categories, another variable, primary article topic, was tested. Primary

article topic was determined by examining the headline of the article, as well as the first two

paragraphs of each article. Primary article topic was examined in order to gain an understanding

of what type of information was covered most in the three newspapers and what topics were

regarded as most significant for coverage by each of the newspapers and when. Topics

addressed, and more specifically the primary topic addressed, in each article also measure

prominence, as perceived importance is attached by the public to particular topics receiving more

frequent media coverage. For primary topic addressed, one to two categories could be selected.

Present primary topics were coded with a 1, while those not present were coded with a 2.

Another variable tested in this content analysis was BP's response/PR strategies

employed. This is the principal purpose of this study and serves as the basis of the fundamental

research questions guiding this content analysis. In order to determine if BP responded

effectively or unethically during the 2010 Gulf oil crisis, response strategies and crisis

management techniques were measured. This variable included various crisis communication

strategies, both ethical and unethical (as described in review above), that could have been

employed by BP and serves to identify which ones BP actually utilized. Based on the response

and management strategies BP chose to employ, conclusions can be made about how effectively

BP responded to the crisis. Furthermore, this variable allows for comparison between the three

newspapers regarding how BP's crisis management skills are portrayed. Categories for this

variable included: attack of the accuser, denial, scapegoating, justification, compensation,

ingratiation, victimage, evasion of responsibility, bolstering, minimization, differentiation,

transcendence, mortification, apology, timely response, acknowledgement of mistakes, clear and

concise dissemination of message by a BP spokesperson or official, expressing concern and

sympathy for impact, updating the public or stakeholders on the situation/recovery efforts, "no

comment" used by a BP spokesperson or official, and other. Refer to Appendix B for definitions

of these categories, as well as the "Action and Strategies in Crisis Communication" above. It is

also important to note that categories within this variable are not mutually exclusive. For

example, if a BP executive responded to the media with "no comment," this action would be

coded as both "no comment" used by a BP spokesperson or official and as evasion of

responsibility, as BP was not accountable for its actions or statements and chose to avoid

offering an answer to a question directly posed by the media. This coding is supported in the

literature. For this variable, if a particular response strategy was present, it was coded with a 1. If

a response strategy was not present in the article, it was coded with a 2.

Related to the previous variable, the presence of unethical crisis management or

communication practices was examined. For the purpose of this study, attack of the accuser,

denial, scapegoating, justification, ingratiation, victimage, evasion of responsibility, bolstering,

minimization, differentiation, transcendence, mortification, and "no comment" used by a BP

spokesperson or official were considered unethical practices. Meanwhile, compensation,

apology, timely response, acknowledgment of mistakes, clear and concise dissemination of

messages by a BP official or spokesperson, expressing concern and sympathy for impact, and

updating the public or stakeholders on the situation/recovery efforts were deemed ethical

practices. If an unethical practice was present, it was coded with a 1. If no unethical practice was

present in the article, it was coded with a 2.

Coder Selection and Training

In addition to the primary coder, who coded all 164 articles, a second coder was

employed to code ten percent of the total sample (17 articles). The second coder's results were

then compared to those of the primary coder in order to determine inter-rater reliability. The

second coder was paid for her work through a Holcomb Undergraduate Grant obtained by the

primary coder through Butler University.

The second coder, who had no previous experience or knowledge in the field of crisis communication or content analyses, was trained by the primary coder to carry out the content analysis on the 17 articles using the same coding instrument devised by the primary coder. Training for the second coder included orientation to the research study, explanation of content analysis, explanation of coding variables and categories by the primary coder, as well as the coding of four articles not included in the final sample by the second coder until near perfect agreement was reached with the principal coder. This training took approximately two hours. The second coder completed coding of the articles twice, as the first time discrepancies between the primary and secondary coder were too great to ensure reliability. This was due to a time lag from when the second coder was initially trained until when she coded the articles for the first time due to academic holidays (five weeks). Upon realization of observable discrepancies by the primary coder on the first couple of articles, the second coder was re-trained and completed coding of the articles again.

The articles chosen for the second coder were randomly selected using a random numbers chart, in which all 164 articles were assigned a number and then 17 were randomly selected by correlating the articles with the random numbers chart. The second coder was also provided with the same coding instrument, including variable and category definitions that the principal researcher used.

To test inter-rater reliability, Cohen's Kappa coefficient statistic was employed. This statistic measures agreement while also accounting for coded agreement that would occur by chance.

CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

Results

For this content analysis, primarily descriptive statistics were applied to analyze the data,

using the statistical program SPSS for Windows.

General Results on Media Coverage

In the final sample, 53 percent (87) of the 164 articles were from New Orleans' *Times-Picayune,* 32.9 percent (54) of the articles were from the *New York Times,* and 14 percent (23) were from the United Kingdom's *Herald.* All articles were from late April to mid September 2010. 38 articles (23.2 percent) studied were from May, 26.8 percent (44) were from July, and 26.8 percent (37) were from August. One hundred seven of the 164 articles (65.2 percent) were published in the front (news) section of the newspaper, with 30.5 percent (50) of all articles located on the front page. The average length of articles examined in this study was 833.7 words, with a minimum of 64 words and a maximum of 5401 words (SD=525.69). See Appendix C for all frequencies.

Sources Cited or Quoted

Frequencies of specific sources cited or quoted in the articles varied, with some present in over 50 percent of the articles and others not present at all (emergency response workers and veterinarians/animal scientists). BP executives were cited or quoted most frequently of all sources, appearing in 53.7 percent (88) of the articles. Of these 88 articles, 38 were found in the *Times-Picayune* (43.2 percent), 34 in the *New York Times* (38.6 percent)*,* and 16 (18.2 percent) in the *Herald*. Of only 23 total articles from the *Herald,* 69.6 percent (16) cited or quoted BP

executives, such as former CEO Tony Hayward, new CEO Bob Dudley, and Executive Vice

President Lamar McKay. Other sources connected to BP were less frequently represented in the

articles, with only 11 percent (18) of articles citing or quoting a BP spokesperson and only 9.8

percent (16) of articles including a BP employee.

Government officials were cited or quoted frequently within the articles. In 61.6 percent

(101) of the articles, a U.S. government official or agency was cited or quoted, ranging from the

Senator of Arkansas to the Environmental Protection Agency. Forty-nine of these 101 articles

(48.5 percent) with a U.S. government official or agency as a source were found in the *Times-*

Picayune, while 41 were located in the *New York Times* (40.6 percent). 24.4 percent (40) of all

the articles cited or quoted the U.S. President as a source, with over half (21 of 40; 52.5 percent)

found in the *Times-Picayune*. Local Gulf officials, such as Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal,

were cited or quoted in 31.7 percent (52) of the 164 articles analyzed. Forty-three of these 52

articles (82.7 percent) citing or quoting a local Gulf official as a source were found in the *Times-*

Picayune. National or international industrial or trade organizations, especially those connected

with the fishing and oil industries, were cited or quoted in 24.4 percent (40) of all the articles,

while 27.4 percent (45) of articles included the coast guard as a source. See Table 1 below for

frequencies.

Table 1: *Sources Cited or Quoted Within Articles*

Source:	Source Cited or Quoted in Article:
BP spokesperson	18 (11 %)
BP official or executive	88 (53.7 %)
BP employee	16 (9.8 %)
U.S. government official or agency	101 (61.6 %)
U.S. President	40 (24.4 %)
U.K government official or agency	1 (0.6 %)
U.K Prime Minister	3 (1.8 %)
Local (Gulf) official	52 (31.7 %)

Engineer	5 (3 %)
Environmental scientist	26 (15.9 %)
Environmental activist	12 (7.3 %)
Economist	5 (3 %)
Citizen of Gulf region	9 (5.5 %)
Industrial/trade organization	40 (24.4 %)
Gulf business leader, owner/manager	17 (10.4 %)
Tourist of Gulf	2 (1.2 %)
Health expert	3 (1.8 %)
Coast guard	45 (27.4 %)
Other	46 (28 %)

*** Note: Any variables not listed occurred zero times in the 164 articles

Topics Addressed

Reported action taken by BP was the topic addressed most frequently in articles examined, occurring in 55.5 percent (91) of the articles. Clean-up of the oil spill was the second most frequently addressed topic and was present in 51.8 percent (85) of the 164 articles, with a great deal of emphasis placed on the development and implementation of new technology for leaking oil valves. Comments made by both BP and the government were present in just under half of the articles, with comments made by BP found in 47 percent (77) of articles and comments made by the government in 43.3 percent (71) of articles. These comments ranged from formal announcements to the nation or Gulf residents to quotes of government officials to the press. Sixty-eight articles (41.5 percent) addressed topics not included in the coding instrument, such as legal trials, a moratorium placed on Gulf fishers, and volunteer opportunities for clean-up. Meanwhile, criticism of BP's crisis management efforts was present in 35.4 percent (58) of the articles analyzed and was found coming from a variety of sources, from government officials and agencies to residents of the Gulf.

The most frequently addressed topics, including reported action taken by BP, comment made by BP, and comment made by government, were present in articles in each of the three

newspapers relatively evenly. Clean-up of the oil spill, however, was addressed in the *Times-Picayune* more often than the other newspapers with almost half (41 of the 85) of the articles with this topic present found in the Gulf newspaper. See Table 2 below for frequencies.

Table 2: *Topics Addressed in Articles*

Topic Addressed in Article:	Number of Articles Topic Addressed In:
Impact on land, water, and/or plant life	47 (28.7 %)
Impact on humans and/or animal life	56 (34.1 %)
Clean-up processes or attempts to stop the spill	85 (51.8 %)
Government comment	71 (43.3 %)
Government action/policies	49 (29.9 %)
Economic impact on Gulf tourism and local (Gulf) businesses	44 (26.8 %)
Economic impact on BP stock and profits	28 (17.1 %)
Economic impact on other national/international businesses or industries	41 (25 %)
Comment made by BP	77 (47 %)
Reported action taken by BP regarding management of the spill	91 (55.5 %)
Criticism of BP's crisis management response	58 (35.4 %)
Other	68 (41.5 %)

*** Note: Any variables not listed occurred zero times in the 164 articles

Primary Topics Addressed

Despite being the second most frequently addressed topic in the articles in terms of all possible topics that were mentioned in articles, clean-up of the oil spill served as the most frequently addressed primary topic, those highlighted in the headline and/or first two paragraphs, with 31.7 percent (52) of articles focusing on this topic. For example, efforts to seal valves, both with new technologically advanced fixtures and with mud, as well as efforts to clean beaches covered in oil slicks were recurring themes under this primary topic. Reported action taken by BP, such as compensation paid to individuals impacted by the spill or conferences with local Gulf officials, accounted as the primary topic addressed in 23.2 percent (38) of the articles.

Furthermore, criticism of BP's crisis management efforts was addressed as the primary topic in

20.1 percent (33) of the articles. Topics not included in the coding instrument accounted for the

primary topic in 26.8 percent (44) of the 164 articles. Some examples of primary topics coded in

the "other" category that accounted for this large percentage included legal trials involving BP or

weather related halting of clean-up.

Environmental and ecological impact of the oil spill, although likely assumed to be core

concerns or focus areas of attention during such crises, did not occur frequently as primary topics

addressed in this study. Only 9.1 percent (15) of the articles included impact on land, water,

and/or plant life as a primary topic, while only 11 percent (18) of the articles focused on impact

on humans and/or animal life as a primary topic. The articles in which these two categories

served as the primary topic were disproportionately found in the *Times-Picayune*. Ten of the 15

articles (66.7 percent) that addressed impact on land, water, and/or plant life as a primary topic,

such as oil beads found on beaches, were found in the *Times-Picayune*; 11 of the 18 (61.1

percent) that addressed impact on humans and/or animal life, including oil-covered seagulls and

injured Deepwater Horizon rig workers, were found in the *Times-Picayune* as well. Furthermore,

government action/policy, economic on Gulf tourism and local (Gulf) businesses, and economic

impact on other national/international businesses or industries served as primary topics most

frequently in the *Times-Picayune*. Contrarily, economic impact on BP stock and profits was

addressed as the primary topic in the *Herald* disproportionately, with a great deal of attention

given to declining stock values for the company. Six of the 13 articles (46.2 percent) that

included this category as the primary topic were from the U.K. newspaper. See Table 3 below for

frequencies.

Table 3: *Primary Topics Addressed in Articles*

Primary Topic Addressed in Article:	Number of Articles Primary Topic Addressed In:
Impact on land, water, and/or plant life	15 (9.1 %)
Impact on humans and/or animal life	18 (11 %)
Clean-up processes or attempts to stop the spill	52 (31.7 %)
Government comment	13 (7.9 %)
Government action/policies	21 (12.8 %)
Economic impact on Gulf tourism and local (Gulf) businesses	19 (11.6 %)
Economic impact on BP stock and profits	13 (7.9 %)
Economic impact on other national/international businesses or industries	15 (9.1 %)
Comment made by BP	3 (1.8 %)
Reported action taken by BP regarding management of the spill	38 (23.2 %)
Criticism of BP's crisis management response	33 (20.1 %)
Other	44 (26.8 %)

*** Note: Any variables not listed occurred zero times in the 164 articles

BP's Response/PR Strategies Employed

Results pertaining to BP's response and crisis management strategies reveal that BP employed effective and ethical crisis communication practices more often than unethical strategies. In 43.3 percent (77) of the articles, BP updated the public or stakeholders on the situation/recovery efforts, as well as displayed clear, concise dissemination of a message by a BP spokesperson or official in 28.7 percent (47) of the articles. Compensation was the third most frequently occurring PR and crisis management strategy employed by BP and was present in 23.2 percent (38) of the articles. Compensation was primarily reported as restitution being paid to Gulf businesses ensuing financial losses, rig workers injured during the explosion on the Deepwater Horizon rig, and to the State of Louisiana.

Crisis management strategies considered unethical were less apparent in the articles, with

evasion of responsibility by BP found in 16.5 percent (27) of the articles. Examples of evasion of

responsibility found in the sample of articles included the refusal of BP to comment on photos

falsely doctored on Photoshop of their work station, as well as when former CEO Tony Hayward

took a vacation in the midst of the crisis. Denial and scapegoating were the other most frequently

unethical practices employed by BP, yet were found in a low percentage of articles. Denial,

including BP's outright decree that they could do nothing to stop increased flows of oil from

leaking valves, was apparent in 5.5 percent (9) of the articles, while scapegoating was present in

4.9 percent (8) of the articles. An example of scapegoating found in the articles included when

BP placed the blame of the Deepwater Horizon explosion on Transocean instead of taking

responsibility itself. Furthermore, BP only acknowledged their mistakes in 3.7 percent of the

articles (6) and offered a clear apology in only 2 articles (1.2 percent). Overall, unethical

responses or crisis management strategies were employed by BP in 17.7 percent (29) of the 164

articles, with BP employing tactics and practices deemed effective and ethical in 82.3 percent

(135) of the articles. See Table 4 below for frequencies.

Table 4: *BP's Response to the Crisis*

BP's response/PR strategies employed:	Times-Picayune	New York Times	Herald	Total:
Attack of accuser	0	1	0	1 (0.6 %)
Denial	3	5	1	9 (5.5 %)
Scapegoating	1	5	2	8 (4.9 %)
Compensation	24	9	5	38 (23.2 %)
Evasion of responsibility	7	14	6	27 (16.5 %)
Minimization	1	2	0	3 (1.8 %)
Mortification	0	1	0	1 (0.6 %)
Apology	1	0	1	2 (1.2 %)
Timely response	7	7	1	15 (9.1 %)
Acknowledgment of mistakes	4	2	0	6 (3.7 %)

Clear, concise dissemination of message by BP	21	20	6	47 (28.7 %)
Expressing sympathy and concern for impact	1	0	1	2 (1.2 %)
Updating the public or stakeholders of the situation/recovery efforts	31	29	11	71 (43.3 %)
"No comment" by BP	4	2	2	8 (4.9 %)
Other	1	1	0	2 (1.2 %)

*** Note: Any variables not listed occurred zero times in the 164 articles

Differences in Crisis Response Strategies

BP's crisis management responses, as well as media coverage of these responses, differed throughout the five month oil spill crisis. Examination of each of the "stages" of the crisis revealed discrepancies regarding unethical and ethical crisis responses. Of the 29 articles that included unethical responses, 11 (37.9 percent) were found in the first stage of the crisis, April 20-May 5. This stage is important to examine as it was the two weeks following the origin of the crisis. Immediate response strategies employed during a crisis are crucial to the reputation of organization involved as public perception is highly malleable during this time. Of the 45 total articles that comprised the sample from Stage 1, 4 included denial (8.9 percent), 3 included scapegoating (6.7 percent), 9 included evasion of responsibility (20 percent), 1 included minimization (2.2 percent), and 2 included "no comment" by a BP official or spokesperson (4.4 percent). More than one of these unethical response strategies were found in some articles, which explains why a total of 19 unethical response strategies were found, yet were included in only 11 articles. For example, sub-categories under the "BP crisis management response" variable were not mutually exclusive, meaning that scapegoating and evasion of responsibility could be coded

for the same article as blaming others in turn is not assuming responsibility for actions or

comments.

The only other stage that showed a significant amount of unethical responses was Stage 4

(July 21-29), which included 7 of the 29 unethical responses (24.1 percent) reported in the 164

total articles. While frequency differences were apparent, Pearson Chi-Square results did not

detect significant differences in unethical responses as a function of crisis stage, because sample

size of articles within some stages was limited, with fewer than five articles found in a cell. In

order to conduct a Chi Square statistic, more than five cases in each cell must be examined. See

Table 5 below for frequencies.

Table 5: *Presence of Unethical Crisis Response Strategies by Stages*

Stage of Crisis:	Number of Articles Unethical Crisis Response Present In:
Stage 1 (April 20-May 5)	11
Stage 2 (May 26-May 30)	3
Stage 3 (June 18-June 26)	2
Stage 4 (July 21-July 29)	7
Stage 5 (August 21-August 28)	4
Stage 6 (September 18-September 23)	2

However, a significant difference was found in overall unethical responses among all 164

articles. As reported above, articles including unethical crisis management responses employed

by BP were found disproportionately in the *New York Times* (14 articles from this newspaper out

of 29 articles containing unethical responses from all three newspapers—48.3 percent), as well

as disproportionately within the *Herald* itself (7 articles included unethical responses out of a

sample size of 23 articles for this newspaper—30.4 percent). These differences are significant, as

tested by the Pearson Chi-Square statistic: $X^2 = 9.39$ (df = 2, p<.01). See Table 6 below for

frequencies.

Table 6: *Presence of Unethical Crisis Response Strategies by Source*

	Times Picayune	New York Times	Herald	Total:
Unethical PR Crisis Response Employed by BP	8	14	7	29

Significant differences were also found in specific unethical response strategies. Evasion

of responsibility was found in 27 of the 164 articles (16.5 percent). Of the 27 articles that

included evasion of responsibility, 14 (51.9 percent) were found in the *New York Times*, which is

a much greater amount than the other two newspapers ($X^2 = 9.55$, df = 2, p < .01).

Additionally, scapegoating was another unethical response strategy approaching

significant difference ($X^2 = 5.56$. df = 2, p < .07). Of the 8 articles (out of 164 total—4.9 percent)

that included scapegoating, 5 were found in *the New York Times* (62.5 percent). See Table 7

below for results.

Table 7: *Chi Square Results-Significant Difference in BP's Crisis Management Responses*

Crisis Management Response Employed by BP:	X^2	df	p value
Scapegoating	5.56	2	.06
Evasion of responsibility	9.55	2	.01**
Unethical response employed	9.40	2	.01**

*p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

Discussion

This thesis study set out to determine crisis communication practices employed by an international company whose crisis occurred in U.S. territory. For this study the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico off the Southeastern coast of the United States serves as contemporary example of an organization facing a crisis, as well as provides a forum for investigating and analyzing crisis communication in action. While this particular crisis can be deemed an environmental crisis by nature, it is unique in regard to its length and scope. Most crises are one-time incidences that are short-lived; however, the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill was an ongoing crisis spanning across a five-month period. This is important to recognize as crisis communication responses had to remain continuous, as well as did efforts to maintain favorable public perception. It is also important to understand the scope of the BP oil spill as it had an international component. Even though the crisis itself took place on U.S. territory, BP is a British-owned company. While a majority of the primary action taken to mitigate the impact of the crisis was done within the U.S., crisis communication practices had to be executed both domestically and internationally. The reputation of BP as a company had to be protected within the United States, as well as within the United Kingdom. Therefore, this study focused not only on two U.S. newspapers (the *New York Times* and the *Times-Picayune*), but also a U.K. national newspaper (the *Herald*).

Nature of Media Coverage

Prominence given to media coverage of a crisis plays an important role in the public's perception of the organization involved, as well as its management of the crisis. Regarding

research question one related to media coverage of the 2010 BP Gulf oil crisis, a great deal of prominence was given to the crisis throughout the five-month period in which it occurred from April 20 through September 19. This was expected as changes in oil flow, efforts to stop leaking oil valves, as well as responses/actions occurred within the government and BP management. In the study it was found that each month the crisis and BP's response received media coverage, with the largest number of articles published in May (23.2 percent/38 articles), July (26.8 percent/44 articles), and August (26.8 percent/ 37 articles).

Furthermore, media coverage within stages of the crisis was parallel to the frequency of media coverage by month. Forty-five articles (27.4 percent) were from the first stage of the crisis (April 20-May 5), while 44 articles (26.8 percent) represented Stage 4 (July 21-29). Because communication with the public on behalf of an organization is crucial immediately following a crisis, it is not surprising that the Stage 1 received the most media coverage. It is also of no surprise that Stage 4 (July 21-29) received the second most coverage as a cluster of explosive events took place, including BP admitting to falsely using Photoshop in order to exaggerate activity in their oil spill command center, Tropical Storm Bonnie putting a halt on oil spill clean-up and sealing efforts, the discovery that alarms were shut off on the Deepwater Horizon oil rig that exploded to allow workers to sleep, and the announcement that former CEO Tony Hayward was planning to step down from his leadership position. These were all significant events that portrayed BP in a negative way, and therefore, were newsworthy for media coverage. This research shows that despite the ongoing nature of this crisis, media coverage was continuous throughout, revealing that the topic of BP and the oil spill was regarded as important by the newspapers, and thus likely also to be viewed as important by the public, not only for the initial month of the crisis but for its entirety.

Not only was the BP oil spill news coverage high in terms of total article count, but also the news was often prominently displayed. The majority of articles, 107 of the 164 articles (65.2 percent), were published in the front (news) section of the newspaper, with 30.5 percent (50) of all articles located on the front page. Location of the article is an important descriptor of prominence; therefore, it can be said that the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill was considered newsworthy and was given significant prominence as front page news in a large percentage of the cases studied in the content analysis. This was expected, especially within the *Times-Picayune*, as articles possessed news values of proximity (except for the *Herald*), human interest, impact, timeliness, and unusualness due to its nature as a crisis.

Sources Cited or Quoted Within Articles

Not surprisingly, individuals connected to BP were also featured in a high percentage of the articles examined, revealing that the organization was taking action to manage the crisis, as well as openly communicate with the public, which is an integral component of effective crisis communication. Regarding research question two, BP executives were cited or quoted most frequently of all sources, appearing in 53.7 percent (88) of the articles. Of these 88 articles, 38 were found in the *Times-Picayune* (43.2 percent), which was the highest percentage of the three newspapers. This was expected as this newspaper is based in the Gulf, takes on a local perspective, and is obligated to providing Gulf residents with reports of action being taken to directly remedy their situations. Meanwhile, of only 23 total articles from the *Herald,* 69.6 percent (16) cited or quoted BP executives. This significant difference may be explained due to the more business-oriented interests of the U.K. newspaper as it serves as the international headquarters of BP. Articles from the *Herald* tended to be more formally written and detached

from the crisis's impact on the Gulf. Reporting in this newspaper was indifferent, focusing on BP's action and stock from BP's perspective; hence, it is not shocking that BP executives are disproportionately cited or quoted.

Because the crisis occurred within U.S. territory and had farther reaching impact than the Gulf alone, U.S. government officials were cited or quoted frequently within the articles as well. In 61.6 percent (101) of the articles, U.S. government officials or agencies, often the Minerals Management Service and members of Congress, were cited or quoted, while 24.4 percent (40) of all the articles cited or quoted the U.S. President as a source. This reveals prominence given to the crisis, as it was considered important enough for influential sources to be cited or quoted within articles regarding the topic and BP's response. Most U.S. government officials were cited or quoted regarding comments of reassurance to Gulf residents, related to clean-up and impact of the spill, or to criticism of BP's response and management of the crisis. Public opinion is highly swayed by the government's stance on an issue; therefore, it was not surprising that the government was chosen as a source by news reporters when covering this crisis

It is also important to note that local Gulf officials were cited or quoted in 31.7 percent (52) of the 164 articles analyzed. Forty-three of these 52 articles (82.7 percent) citing or quoting Gulf officials as a source were found in the *Times-Picayune*. This was expected as this newspaper is based in the Gulf where direct impact from the crisis was felt. The close proximity to the site of the crisis explains the more locally focused nature of media coverage in this particular newspaper.

Topics Addressed in Media Coverage

Regarding research question three, topics addressed in media coverage of the 2010 BP oil spill crisis in this study, the four most frequently addressed article topics included reported action taken by BP (55.5 percent/ 91 articles), clean-up (51.8 percent/ 85 articles), comments made by BP (47 percent/ 77 articles), and comments made by the U.S. government (43.3 percent/ 71 articles). This reveals that topics considered most important by newspaper editors, and therefore, those receiving more media coverage, were related to BP's response, both action and comments, to the crisis, as well as the U.S. government's opinion on BP's efforts. This is not surprising as the public desires for quick and successful action to be taken, as well as to be well-informed of recovery efforts from those involved.

Primary Topics Addressed Within Articles

Additionally, clean-up of the oil spill was the most frequently addressed primary topic appearing in 31.7 percent (52) of the 164 articles examined in this study, while reported action taken by BP was the second most frequently addressed primary topic, appearing in 23.2 percent (38) of the articles. It is also important to note that criticism of BP's crisis management was the third most frequently occurring primary topic addressed in the articles (20.1 percent/ 33 articles). Because primary topics were defined as topics highlighted in the headline and/or first two paragraphs of an article, the most frequently occurring primary topics differ from the most frequent topics addressed in general. The primary topics addressed most often emphasize the significance placed upon action taken by BP to manage the crisis on an environmental and ecological level, as well as on a public relations level. This is not surprising as the public desires

continuous communication by the organization involved as an effective crisis response strategy, as well as proof that responsibility and action are being assumed.

It was shocking to find that environmental and ecological impact of the oil spill, although likely to be an area of primary concern for the U.S., and more specifically, the Gulf, did not occur frequently as primary topics addressed in this study. Only 9.1 percent (15) of the articles included impact on land, water, and/or plant life as a primary topic, while only 11 percent (18) of the articles focused on impact on humans and/or animal life as a primary topic. Of the few articles in which these two categories served as the primary topic, a disproportionate number was found in the *Times-Picayune* as expected. Ten of the 15 articles (66.7 percent) that addressed impact on land, water, and/or plant life as a primary topic were found in the *Times-Picayune*; 11 of the 18 (61.1 percent) that addressed impact on humans and/or animal life were found in the *Times-Picayune* as well. This was not a shocking finding, as environmental and ecological impact was much greater on the Gulf region due to the location of the crisis and the high priority of Gulf residents to restore the environment to the way it was prior to the crisis.

Furthermore, government action/policy, economic impact on Gulf tourism and local (Gulf) businesses, and economic impact on other national/international businesses or industries were disproportionately represented in the *Times-Picayune*. These results were not surprising as travel and tourism to the Gulf were severely limited due to the environmental and ecological damage caused by the crisis. Due to the unattractive nature of the Gulf as a tourist destination, the economy of the Gulf, including Gulf businesses, was impacted greatly as the crisis occurred throughout months considered vacation time for most individuals and families. Other national and international businesses, especially the fishing industry, were negatively impacted as well

due to the crisis as oil affected the quality of fish caught, the ability to fish in general, and the

public's likelihood to purchase fish from the Gulf region.

On a wider scale, economic impact on BP stock and profits was disproportionately

addressed as the primary topic in the *Herald*, with a great deal of attention given to declining

stock values for the company. Six of the 13 articles (46.2 percent) that included this category as

the primary topic were from the U.K. newspaper. This is not surprising as coverage of the crisis

in the Herald assumed a more formal nature and tended to focus more on business aspects. As

the headquarters for BP, the United Kingdom had more vested interest in the economic success

or failure of the company than the environmental, ecological, and tourism impact experienced in

Gulf.

BP's Response and Crisis Management Strategies Employed During the Crisis

Related to research question four regarding BP's efforts to respond to the crisis, results

revealed that BP employed both ethical and unethical crisis management strategies, yet more

often than not, the strategies executed by BP were ethical and demonstrated effective crisis

communication. Of the 164 articles included in the final sample, 82.3 percent (135) contained

effective and ethical crisis management responses employed by BP. Of these ethical practices,

BP updated the public or stakeholders on the situation/recovery efforts in 43.3 percent (77) of the

articles, as well as displayed clear, concise dissemination of a message by a BP spokesperson or

official in 28.7 percent (47) of the articles. These two response strategies denote responsibility

and concern/sympathy for the impact caused by the crisis. These responses are also considered

effective crisis management according to scholarly research as they serve to notify, develop, and

maintain positive public perception of the organization, its actions, and its reputation during the

time of a crisis.

Furthermore, BP also frequently employed compensation as a PR and crisis management

strategy. Compensation, especially to victims of the Deepwater Horizon rig explosion and to

Gulf businesses economically impacted by the crisis, was found in 23.2 percent (38) of the

articles. This reveals that BP acknowledged the impact that the crisis directly had upon

individuals and businesses, as well as expressed willingness to take action to repay or repair

damage caused to such individuals and organizations. It was expected that BP would compensate

individuals personally injured or those businesses sustaining detrimental losses as compensation

is an ethical act displaying responsibility in a crisis situation in which an organization is

involved. However, the overall high percentage of ethical response strategies employed by BP

was shocking as it is a more natural response for organizations or individuals under pressure and

blame to react unethically and without consideration.

Unethical Crisis Response Strategies Employed by BP

While only a small percentage of the 164 articles examined for this study were found to

contain unethical crisis management strategies (17.7 percent/ 29 articles), it is still important to

note that during the course of the crisis, BP did engage in some degree of behavior that is

considered unethical. Regarding research question five, evasion of responsibility (16.5

percent/27 articles), denial (5.5 percent/9 articles), and scapegoating (4.9 percent/8 articles) were

the most frequently occurring unethical practices reportedly employed by BP. This type of

behavior was not surprising as the unexpected nature of a crisis can catch an organization off

guard and unprepared. In times of panic or pressure, it is often easier for organizational leaders to

ignore their responsibility to respond to the crisis, as well as their accountability to the public. Placing blame on others, denying that an event occurred as a result of the organization or that it even took place at all, and employing other responses that evade responsibility, represent simpler and less risky strategies for a company to follow.

Furthermore, unethical crisis management strategies were found disproportionately in the *New York Times* in comparison to the other two newspapers, answering research question six regarding differences in media coverage as a function of the news source in which articles were found. Of the 29 articles that included unethical responses, 14 were from the *New York Times* (48.3 percent). This significant difference was not surprising as this publication often assumes a critical watchdog role for the nation. Also, as a domestic newspaper, the *New York Times* has vested interest in the crisis as it occurred in U.S. territory, yet it does not have as much interest in Gulf residents and businesses as the *Times-Picayune*. Therefore, the *New York Times* assumes a more objective and detached view of the crisis in its reporting, allowing for a more critical stance.

It is also important to note that unethical responses were found disproportionately within the small sample of *Herald* articles as well, with 7 articles including unethical responses out of a sample size of only 23 articles for this newspaper—30.4 percent. While the high percentage of unethical responses found in the *New York Times* can be explained by its watchdog role, the high proportion of unethical responses of BP in the *Herald* may be attributed to its more external position to the crisis, as well as its more detached viewpoint toward residents and businesses in the Gulf itself. This significant difference was unexpected, yet due to its distance from the location of the crisis and its indifference toward the environmental, ecological, and economic impact specifically on the Gulf, it can be understood.

Also answering research question four, the particular stage of the crisis played a significant role regarding when unethical crisis responses occurred. Of the 29 articles that included unethical crisis management responses, 11 (37.9 percent) were found in the first two weeks after the crisis erupted (stage 1: April 20-May 5). As explained earlier, during a crisis, immediate response is essential to the reputation of the organization involved as public perception is much more likely to be influenced during this time. Therefore, it is significant to note that within this crucial first stage of the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill crisis, a large degree of media coverage regarding BP's crisis management response was unethical in nature. This came as no surprise as initial responses to unexpected crises are often ones that evade responsibility, especially when organizations involved are not fully prepared to manage them. This cluster of unethical crisis management strategies employed by BP during stage one of the crisis portrayed the organization negatively, highlighting its unpreparedness, lack of professionalism, and scant organizational skills. This unethical behavior on behalf of BP, as well as the negative media coverage that it received as a result, most likely led to public disapproval of BP.

2010 BP Oil Spill vs. Exxon Valdez

When comparing the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill to the infamous Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989, it appears that BP engaged in much of the same crisis management practices that its predecessor did. While BP did respond quickly after the initial explosion of the Deepwater Horizon rig, unlike Exxon's non-insightful and slow response according to Johnson and Sellnow (1995), BP did employ the same unethical crisis responses, including denial, scapegoating, and evasion of responsibility. Additionally, just as Exxon took a proactive approach, discouraging increased government regulation of oil transportation in order to protect its assets, BP also took a

proactive approach openly communicating with the public and employing constant efforts to stop leaking oil valves.

Overall, it is important to note that BP employed crisis management strategies considered effective and ethical more often than it did those considered unethical. While BP may have employed effective, ethical crisis communication strategies throughout most of the crisis and likely minimized the public's dissatisfaction with the organization, negative public opinion of the company may have already been formed due to blunders and seemingly indifferent responses in the first stage of the crisis. BP's unethical responses during the early state of the crisis may not have been the only reason that such negative public opinion formed, but rather the overall damaging environmental and economic impact that the crisis had upon individuals and businesses most likely accounted for a great deal of dissatisfaction with BP. Understanding the nature of media coverage, the degree of prominence given to coverage of the crisis, as well as crisis management response strategies employed by BP help to explain the public's perception of the organization and its efforts to resolve the crisis, as well as help foreshadow BP's future.

Conclusion

Crisis management and communications is an essential aspect of public relations, that while often overlooked or not given sufficient attention, can determine the overall success or failure of an organization. The ability for an organization to respond quickly and effectively during a crisis is imperative to repairing and protecting its reputation among the public. According to extant research of the agenda setting theory, the public develops perceptions of a particular event or crisis, as well as the organization that is involved, through media coverage. This perception is influenced by a variety of factors, including prominence given to media

coverage of such an event or organization; type, tone, and portrayal of an event or organization within media coverage; past organizational history and reputation among the public; as well as what action was taken by the organization to manage the event or crisis. These factors, in addition to countless others, contribute to shaping public perception of an organization caught in the middle of a crisis. Understanding how to effectively communicate with the public in times of crises in order to help affected publics, as well as protect reputation and financial livelihood is imperative to an organization and should be well-planned, executed, and evaluated.

Crisis management and communication has emerged as an important field in public relations as crises are inevitable and effective management of such crises is crucial to the longevity of an organization. Scholarly research reveals that the process of crisis communication is comprised of three main stages: pre-crisis planning, crisis management during the time of a crisis, and post-crisis evaluation and learning. Preparation for a crisis is an integral aspect of effective crisis communication and is comprised of developing a crisis management plan, as well as monitoring for and training individuals within the organization how to respond to potential crises. Crisis management during the actual crisis is highly complex and includes quick and decisive, yet thoughtful action. There are various strategies and tactics that can be employed by an organization in crisis, some of which are ethical and some of which are not as described previously. In order to repair and protect an organization's reputation among stakeholders, it is in an organization's best interest to respond in a timely and ethical manner. Post-crisis evaluation takes place after a crisis is deemed resolved and involves reflection on behalf of the organization on their crisis management decisions, skills, and responses. This stage also serves as a tool for learning for an organization, as effective and ineffective crisis management responses are detected and adjusted for future potential crises.

This study examined BP as a contemporary example of an organization's efforts to manage a crisis and to protect, restore, and maintain its reputation among the public. In order to understand BP's response to the 2010 Gulf oil crisis, as well as to evaluate the organization on whether or not the crisis management strategies that it chose to employ were effective and ethical, scholarly research in the field of crisis communication was studied and a content analysis was conducted.

Major findings from the content analysis conducted on the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill reveal that BP was given a great deal of media coverage and prominence throughout the duration of the crisis in all three newspapers with a majority of articles appearing in the front (news) section, and many on the front page, of the newspapers. Media coverage was especially high during the first stage of the crisis (April 20-May 5) as the crisis was unexpected and newsworthy, as well as during the fourth stage of the crisis (July 21-29) as a cluster of significant events for BP's organization, such as the announcement that former CEO Tony Hayward would be stepping down, occurred. Furthermore, BP executives and U.S. government officials/agencies were the most frequently cited or quoted sources found in media coverage, as these individuals are considered important and their opinions valued by the public as experts. Clean-up efforts, reported action taken by BP to manage the crisis, as well as criticism of BP's management of the crisis were the primary topics most frequently addressed in this study. This reveals the public's desire to know that action is being taken to remedy the crisis and shows the public's overall dissatisfaction with BP's efforts to manage the situation.

While BP primarily employed crisis management response strategies considered ethical, such as updating the public in a clear, concise manner, a majority of the time, there were some instances when BP engaged in unethical strategies during the crisis. These unethical responses

most often were denial, scapegoating, and evasion of responsibility and were clustered at the

beginning of the crisis (Stage 1—April 20-May 5), portraying the company as unorganized,

unprepared, and lacking professionalism. While overall BP's crisis responses may have been

favorable, their initial reaction most likely negatively shaded the public's perception of the

organization for the rest of the crisis; this also may explain the high frequency of criticism of the

company's response found in media coverage.

Crisis communication is an important aspect of public relations as it can ultimately

determine the success or failure of an organization, both financially and with the public. Crises

are inevitable; therefore, it is imperative for organizations to be well-prepared, well-trained, and

ready for when crises do strike. Effective and ethical crisis communication has the power to

uphold an organization's reputation with the public, as well as can protect an organization's

livelihood and support its overall success in the future.

Implications

The present study of the 2010 BP oil spill crisis contributes to the field of crisis

communication and public relations, as it highlights the significance of being proactive for all

contingencies. PR practitioners must realize that crises are both inevitable and unexpected. The

often unforeseen nature of crises calls for pre-crisis planning, training, and practice. Crisis

communication is important to the field of public relations as an organization's reputation,

financial livelihood, and future success are in jeopardy during the time of a crisis. PR

practitioners should understand that in order to protect an organization involved in a crisis, it is

essential to have a crisis plan developed in advance. It is also vital for PR practitioners to work

with organizations to train individuals on how to execute their crisis communication plan, as well as practice this plan hypothetically to prepare for potential crises.

Furthermore, electing a spokesperson for the organization and preparing messages to disseminate to the public in advance are important organizational steps that should be considered when planning and preparing for crises. It is the role of the PR practitioner to understand crisis communication as a discipline of public relations, including what constitutes effective and ethical crisis management practices, in order to ensure the preparedness and protection of an organization.

This particular study revealed that even with a large multi-national company, professional crisis planning is lacking. It seems few lessons were learned from the Exxon Valdez crisis, as the content analysis revealed similar blunders in communication by BP. The most interesting finding is that BP made the most communication mistakes within the first two weeks of the crisis, the time in which companies should be most cautious and professional in their communications with external and internal publics. This is important for PR practitioners to note as it proves that pre-crisis planning and training is crucial. If BP's PR team would have implemented a crisis communication plan and practiced executing it before the crisis arose, the organization may have been more prepared to handle the crisis effectively.

Also, when BP employed unethical crisis management strategies, the most frequently occurring responses were denial, scapegoating, and evasion of responsibility. These particular unethical responses show BP's lack of preparedness and professionalism. This is important for PR practitioners to note as there is a need not only to have a crisis communication plan developed before a crisis occurs, but also to prepare key messages that the organization would like to convey to the public and elect a spokesperson to disseminate these messages prior to a

crisis. Instead of reacting on instinct and trying to minimize the degree of responsibility an organization has in a crisis, as BP did during stage one of the Gulf oil spill crisis, the PR practitioner would have already worked with the organization to develop a course of action to respond to the situation that was consistent with strategies considered best practices in crisis communication. Furthermore, pre-crisis preparation of messages would allow an organization to express their concern and sympathy for damages caused by the crisis, especially when these damages include injury to humans. This emotional aspect should be considered by PR practitioners when developing and implementing crisis communication plans.

This study also revealed that a great deal of media coverage, as well as prominence, was given to the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill. This is not out of the ordinary, as most crises generate media coverage due to their unexpectedness and often negative implications. This is important for PR practitioners to realize as it emphasizes the imperative to respond quickly and effectively to crises. It is of utmost significance for an organization to be well-prepared in advance for a potential crisis and to employ ethical crisis management strategies, as media coverage of such a crisis is likely to occur. Because the news is highly influential in shaping the public's perception, it is crucial for an organization to receive positive media coverage as its reputation is on the line during times of crisis.

Limitations

Although this study reveals noteworthy trends in the nature of media coverage regarding the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill and BP's response to it, there are some limitations that must be taken into consideration. The small sample size for the content analysis conducted is one limitation, as only 164 articles were selected. This small number may not accurately capture the full range of

topics addressed and actions taken by BP throughout the crisis. Additionally, because only one international, one large national, and one local Gulf newspaper were examined, the study likely did not identify the wide range of BP responses and media coverage of such responses.

While variables and categories under each variable were carefully considered when developing the coding instrument, categories were not mutually exclusive. Categories that comprised the sources cited or quoted, topics addressed, primary topics addressed, and BP crisis management responses variables overlapped. Due to the complex nature of this study, coding these variables and categories was difficult and somewhat subjective to the coder's reading and perceptions. Although much effort was made to operationalize variables and train the second coder, some variables appeared to be problematic. Thus, reliability, and thus validity, on some content may be challenged. Inter-coder reliability, as measured by Cohen's Kappa, for several judged variables ranged from .57-.70, which is generally unacceptable reliability. However, the majority of variables received scores between .77 and 1.0, indicating a high degree of reliability for most critical variables measured.

Future Research

This study examined what constitutes ethical and effective crisis communication and examined crisis communication in the context of BP's 2010 Gulf oil spill. While this study revealed a lot about media's portrayal of the BP oil spill, we do not know if the news coverage had any effects on people's perceptions of BP. Future research may consider public opinion about BP, in light of how it handled the oil spill in the Gulf. Public perceptions will reveal more accurately the overall effectiveness of BP's crisis management efforts.

APPENDIX A:

Code Sheet

Newspaper (origin of article):
1   The Times-Picayune
2   The New York Times
3   The Herald

Year article published:
2010

Month article published:
____   (1-12)

Date article published:
____   (1-31)

Stage of Crisis:
____   Stage 1 (April 20-May 5)
____   Stage 2 (May 26-May 30)
____   Stage 3 (June 18-June 26)
____   Stage 4 (July 21-July 29)
____   Stage 5(August 21-August 28)
____   Stage 6 (September 18-September 23)

Section of newspaper article published:
1   Front Section
2   Sports
3   Arts & Entertainment
4   Business
5   Environment
6   Politics
7   Science
8   Trade
9   Weather
10   Fashion & Style
11   Opinion
12   Health
13   Technology

14   Education
15   Metro
16   Other_____

Page number article found on:

_____

Word count of article:

_____

Sources cited or quoted within article:

Yes (1)   No (2)
_____   _____   BP company spokesperson
_____   _____   BP company official/executive
_____   _____   BP employee
_____   _____   U.S. government official or agency
_____   _____   U.S. President
_____   _____   U.K. government official or agency
_____   _____   U.K. Prime Minister
_____   _____   Local (Gulf) official
_____   _____   Engineer
_____   _____   Environmental scientist
_____   _____   Environment activist
_____   _____   Economist
_____   _____   Citizen of Gulf region
_____   _____   Industrial/Trade organization
_____   _____   Gulf business leader, owner/manager
_____   _____   Tourist of Gulf
_____   _____   Health expert
_____   _____   Veterinarian /animal scientist
_____   _____   Emergency response worker
_____   _____   Coast Guard
_____   _____   Other_____

Topics addressed in article:

Yes (1)   No (2)
_____   _____   Impact on land, water, and/or plant life
_____   _____   Impact on humans and/or animal life
_____   _____   Clean-up processes or attempts to stop the spill

_____   _____   Government Comment
_____   _____   Government Action/Policies
_____   _____   Human interest
_____   _____   Economic impact on Gulf tourism and local (Gulf) businesses
_____   _____   Economic impact on BP stock and profits
_____   _____   Economic impact on other national/international businesses or industries
_____   _____   Comment made by BP
_____   _____   Reported action taken by BP regarding management of the spill
_____   ____‗   Criticism of BP's crisis management response
_____   _____   Other_____

Primary article topic:

Yes (1)   No (2)
_____   _____   Impact on land, water, and/or plant life
_____   _____   Impact on humans and/or animal life
_____   _____   Clean-up processes or attempts to stop the spill
_____   _____   Government Comment
_____   _____   Government Action/Policies
_____   _____   Human interest
_____   _____   Economic impact on Gulf tourism and local (Gulf) businesses
_____   _____   Economic impact on BP stock and profits
_____   _____   Economic impact on other national/international businesses or industries
_____   _____   Comment made by BP
_____   _____   Reported action taken by BP regarding crisis management
_____   _____   Criticism of BP's crisis management response
_____   _____   Other_____

BP's response/PR strategies employed:

Yes (1)   No (2)
_____   _____   Attack of the accuser
_____   _____   Denial
_____   _____   Scapegoating
_____   _____   Justification
_____   _____   Compensation
_____   _____   Ingratiation
_____   _____   Victimage
_____   _____   Evasion of responsibility
_____   _____   Bolstering
_____   _____   Minimization
_____   _____   Differentiation
_____   _____   Transcendence

_____	_____	Mortification
_____	_____	Apology
_____	_____	Timely response
_____	_____	Acknowledgement of mistakes
_____	_____	Clear, concise dissemination of message by BP spokesperson or official
_____	_____	Expressing concern and sympathy for impact
_____	_____	Updating the public or stakeholders on the situation/recovery efforts
_____	_____	"No Comment" used by BP spokesperson or official
_____	_____	Other_____

Unethical Response by BP:

Yes (1)   No (2)

_____   _____

APPENDIX B:

Code Sheet Definitions

Sources cited or quoted within article:

BP company spokesperson- selected individual(s) chosen to speak on behalf of the organization

BP company official/executive – board members, Executive VP; Executive Director; Chief Financial Officer; Chief Executive, Refining and Marketing; Executive VP, Human Resources; Group General Counsel, BP plc; Group Chief Executive

BP employee- rig worker, site manger, project manager, secretary, etc.

U.S. government official or agency –Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Commerce, Secretary of Labor, Secretary of Health and Human Services, members of Congress, Supreme Court Justices, Minerals Management Services, Environmental Protection Agency etc.

U.S. President- Barak Obama

U.K. government official or agency – MPs, members of the House of Lords, The House of Commons Commission, Office of the Chief Executive, etc.

U.K. Prime Minister- David Cameron

Local (Gulf) official – governors of states, lt. governors, attorney generals of states, heads of state departments (education, transportation, etc.), state representatives, mayors of cities, county clerks, director of tourism, etc.

Engineer- bio (medical) engineer, chemical engineer, civil engineer, ocean engineer, mineral/mining engineer, mechanical engineer, etc.

Environmental scientist – ecologist, geologist, environmental chemist, environmental physicist, oceanographer, etc.

Environmental activist- member or official from environmental groups such as the PETA, the Sierra Club, etc.

Economist- accountant, investor, financial analyst, banker, etc.

Citizen of Gulf region- individual(s) living in states in the Gulf region of the U.S such as Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, the Florida pan-handle, etc.

Industrial/Trade Organization-oil industry organizations, fishing industry organizations, etc.

Gulf business leader, owner/manager- Chamber of Commerce, hotel owner/manager, clothing or souvenir shop owner, etc.

Tourist of the Gulf- individual(s) who visit, but do not permanently live in the Gulf region of the U.S.
Health expert – doctor, nurse, surgeon, etc.

Veterinarian/animal scientist- marine biologist, zoologist, ornithologist, etc.

Emergency response worker – paramedic, FEMA employee/volunteer, Red Cross employee/volunteer, etc.

Coast Guard- reserve or full-time individual(s) serving in the Coast Guard as officers, admirals, investigators, etc.

*note: these categories are not mutually exclusive

Topics addressed in article and primary topic addressed in article:

***primary topic – main issue addressed in the headline and first two paragraphs

Impact on land, water, and/or plant life – pollution (water or beach), harm or destruction to plants, etc.

Impact on humans and/or animal life- destruction of wildlife species, oil-covered birds or sea mammals, injured rig workers, etc.

Clean-up processes or attempts to stop the spill – use of new technology/engineering on valves or pipes, efforts to clean beaches or animals, etc.

Government comment – statement made by a federal, state, or local government official

Government action/policies – action taken by federal , state, or local governments, implementation of laws or policies, etc.

Human interest – features on residents of the Gulf area, features on specific businesses/organizations in the Gulf area, opinion pieces, etc.

Economic impact on Gulf tourism and local businesses – related to loss or gain of profits for tourist associated businesses such as restaurants, hotels, tourist attractions; related to an increase or decline in the number of individuals traveling to the region; opinions of tourists or business owners/managers in the area, etc.

Economic impact on BP stock and profits - related to the cost/money spent on clean-up and recovery, loss or gain of profits for BP, changes in BP's stock price, etc.

Economic impact on national and international businesses – related to the loss or gain of profits for large scale businesses whose reach extends beyond the Gulf region, etc. (i.e.: fishing industry)

Comment made by BP – BP employee, executive/official, or spokesperson provides a statement, but no action accompanies comment

Reported action taken by BP regarding management of the spill– BP actions or claims that it is acting to fix the problem/resolve situation, action taken to clean up spill/seal valve, compensation paid by BP to individuals and businesses affected by the spill, etc.

Criticism of BP's crisis management response – negative comments regarding BP's response/handling of problem/situation

*note: these categories are not mutually exclusive

BP's response/PR strategies employed:

Attack of the accuser – reduce the credibility of another, degrade another

Denial – claim that BP not responsible for a particular statement, act, accident, or response

Scapegoating – blame another person or reason outside of BP for act/accident

Justification – attempt to justify (show/prove response or act was reasonable and right) act/accident

Compensation – reimburse victim

Ingratiation - attempt to gain favor with somebody by deliberate efforts; to portray self in positive light in order to gain favor/support among others

Victimage – portray self as victim of accident/act rather than take responsibility

Evasion of responsibility – claim that response was in response to another act (provocation), event occurred because lack of information or ability (defeasibility), claim act was a mishap (accident), claim that act was originally done with good intentions

Bolstering – emphasize good actions/responses in order to overshadow bad responses

Minimization – claim that act or accident was not that serious, downplay significant of a particular act

Differentiation – compare act/accident to another and downplay its offensiveness

Transcendence – draw attention to issues that are considered more important in order to justify act/accident rather than to the accident/crisis as a whole

Mortification – express regret and ask forgiveness for a particular statement or act without accepting responsibility for the situation/crisis as a whole

Apology – acknowledge mistake, express regret, and ask forgiveness for the situation/crisis as a whole

Timely response – appears to answer questions and take action quickly, no delay in response

Acknowledgement of mistakes – admit shortcomings/problems without offering a sincere apology for them, self-criticism without apology

Clear, concise dissemination of message by BP spokesperson or official– consistent content, jargon-free, etc.

Expressing concern and sympathy for impact- acknowledge negative consequences of crisis in a considerate manner but do not full apologize for the situation

Updating the public or stakeholders on the situation/recovery efforts – announcements/releases offered by BP, regular communication apparent

"No comment" used by BP spokesperson or official- refuse to issue a statement or answer to the press or other organizations/individuals when asked about a specific topic

*note: these categories are not mutually exclusive

Unethical response by BP:

The following crisis communication strategies are considered unethical for this study:

Attack of the accuser, denial, scapegoating, evasion of responsibility, minimization, bolstering, transcendence, ingratiation, justification, victimage, differentiation, mortification, "No comment"

APPENDIX C:

Tables of Frequencies and Chi Square Results

Table 8: *Newspaper Source Articles Published In*

Newspaper:	Number of Articles:
Times-Picayune	87 (53 %)
New York Times	54 (32.9%)
Herald	23 (14 %)
Total:	164

Table 9: *Month Article Published*

Month Article Published:	Number of Articles:
April	14 (8.5 %)
May	38 (23.2 %)
June	18 (11 %)
July	44 (26.8 %)
August	37 (22.6 %)
September	13 (7.9 %)

Table 10: *Publication of Articles During Different Stages of the Crisis*

Stage of Crisis:	Number of Articles:
Stage 1 (April 20-May 5)	45 (27.4 %)
Stage 2 (May 26-May 30)	7 (4.3 %)
Stage 3 (June 18-June 26)	18 (11 %)
Stage 4 (July 21-July 29)	44 (26.8 %)
Stage 5 (August 21-August 28)	37 (22.6 %)
Stage 6 (September 18-September 23)	13 (7.9 %)

Table 11: *Section of the Newspaper Article Published In*

Section of Newspaper Article Found In:	Number of Articles:
1 (Front Section)	107 (65.2 %)
2 (Sports)	2 (1.2 %)
4 (Business)	9 (5.5 %)
15 (Metro)	12 (7.3 %)
16 (Other)	10 (6.1 %)

Table 12: *Page Number Article Located On*

Page Number Article Found On:	Number of Articles:
1	50 (30.5 %)
2	5 (3 %)
3	5 (3 %)
4	12 (7.3 %)
5	6 (3.7 %)
6	8 (4.9 %)
7	5 (3 %)
8	1 (0.6 %)
9	5 (3 %)
10	7 (4.3 %)
11	4 (2.4 %)
12	5 (3 %)
13	2 (1.2 %)
14	6 (3.7 %)
15	2 (1.2 %)
16	1 (0.6 %)
17	2 (1.2 %)
18	3 (1.8 %)
19	1 (0.6 %)
20	1 (0.6 %)
22	1 (0.6 %)
23	1 (0.6 %)
26	1 (0.6 %)
30	2 (1.2 %)
31	1 (0.6 %)

Table 13: *Word Count of Articles*

	Total Number of Articles	Minimum Number of Words	Maximum Number of Words	Mean Number of Words	Standard Deviation
Number of Words in Article	164	64	5401	833.66	525.68

*** Note: For all tables, any variables not listed occurred zero times in the 164 articles

Table 14: *Chi Square Results-Significant Difference in Sources Cited or Quoted*

Source Cited or Quoted Within Article:	X^2	df	p value
BP executive or official	7.70	2	.02*
Economist	6.37	2	.04*
U.K Prime Minister	7.27	2	.02*
Local (Gulf) official	27.68	2	.00***

*p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 15: *Chi Square Results-Significant Difference in Topics Addressed Within Articles*

Topic Addressed Within Article:	X^2	df	p value
Economic impact on BP stock and profits	24.26	2	.00***
Comment made by BP	9.93	2	.01**
Reported action taken by BP to manage the spill	8.58	2	.01*

*p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 16: *Chi Square Results-Significant Difference in Primary Topics Addressed Within Articles*

Primary Topic Addressed Within Article:	X^2	df	p value
Government action/policies	7.55	2	.02*
Economic impact on Gulf tourism or local Gulf businesses	5.02	2	.08
Economic impact on BP stock and profits	16.61	2	.00***
Economic impact on other national/international businesses/industries	5.41	2	.07
Comment made by BP	7.27	2	.03*

*p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

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