

EXPERIMENTAL COMPARISON OF TWO POST-CRISIS COMMUNICATION
STRATEGIES: DISCOURSE OF RENEWAL THEORY
AND BOLSTERING

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

Public relations theorists investigating organizational crisis communication have suggested discourse of renewal theory (DRT) as an alternative to more standard apologia tactics. DRT advises organizations in crisis to give the chief executive officer a prominent communication role (rather than other organization personnel or outside consultants). DRT also advises forward-looking communication tactics highlighting potential for organizational growth, improved operations and necessary change. The experiment reported here is the first-known experimental investigation of DRT-based crisis responses. A non-random sample of 114 undergraduate students were randomly assigned to one of four crisis response treatments: CEO-attributed DRT responses, CEO-attributed organizational bolstering responses, non-CEO attributed DRT responses and non-CEO organizational bolstering responses. Contrary to DRT-derived hypotheses, CEO-attributed responses did not generate significantly higher mean attitude toward the organization, message credibility or organizational credibility when compared to non-CEO attributed responses. Similarly, DRT responses did not outperform more standard bolstering apologia tactics.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who helped me and guided me through the trials and tribulations of creating this manuscript. In particular, my family and close friends who stood by me throughout the time taken complete this masterpiece.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

df	Degrees of freedom: number of values free to vary after certain restrictions have been placed on the data
F	A ration of two variances
n	The number of valid (i.e., non-missing) observations used in calculating the t-test
p	Significance level: the probability of rejecting the null hypothesis given that it is true
sd	Standard deviation: a measure that is used to quantify the amount of variation or dispersion of a set of data values
t	Computed value of t test

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Crisis communication is receiving more research attention in public relations. Crises occur in social, political, economic and environmental spheres and have potential to do great harm. Organizational crises are inevitable, but a crisis also offers potential to energize and renew the organization (Seeger et al., 2005). Crises can also bring opportunities, if the crisis is well managed by the organization. According to Heath (1995), organizations that take specific and professional crisis prevention actions tend to suffer less financial and reputational damage than those without these practices. The Discourse of Renewal Theory (DRT) encourages organizations to be transparent, provisional and optimistic when facing a crisis. DRT advises the organization to trust the organization's leadership to overcome the crisis with appropriate communication to anxious stakeholders. The research reported here describes an experiment comparing press releases of different crisis scenarios in a non-profit organization.

Traditionally, post-crisis discourse has a retrospective focus. For example, post-crisis focus on image restoration mainly concerns repairing the image or reputation of the organization affected by the crisis. In general, this approach is not concerned with prospective and provisional communication emphasizing opportunities to renew the organization as a result of the crisis. Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow (2007) also suggested that traditional crisis response strategies and tactics focusing on the immediate aftermath of a crisis need not be the only response alternatives. Assigning blame and responsibility for the crisis may not help the organization retain the enthusiasm and commitment of its various stakeholder groups.

DRT goes beyond image restoration and brings innovative perspectives to post-crisis communication research by emphasizing organizational growth and renewal in the aftermath of the crisis. DRT highlights four characteristics that can move the organization forward post-crisis: provisional communication arising from necessity, prospective communication envisioning a sounder future as a result of the crisis, optimism about the organization's ability to respond and improve as a result of the crisis and leader-based communication opposed to traditional spokesperson communication (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007). Ulmer and colleagues (2007) define provisional communication as responding to the crisis in an immediate, natural manner. Provisional messages are not strategically prepared in advance, but are improvisational in nature (Barone, 2014). The prospective communication characteristic asserts that DRT is concerned with what will happen and what the organization plans to do in response to the crisis. Organizations should also be optimistic and look at potential opportunities revealed by the crisis. DRT is a leader-based communication strategy, since leaders embody the organization and its values, and are essential powers in overcoming crises (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007). DRT also notes that some crisis types may be more amenable to DRT, and not every organization can benefit from DRT. As for types of crisis, massively destructive natural disasters, such as fires and floods, often create a potential space where renewal can occur. They suggested that privately held corporations might more easily adopt DRT strategies than publicly held corporations.

Published research assessing DRT-based crisis responses used case studies following natural disasters, industrial accidents and terrorism. Researchers have called for research investigating the effectiveness of DRT in other types of crises. The research reported here explored DRT's potential via experimental methods, as well as DRT application in non-profit

organizations and other crisis types. This research compared DRT-based organizational responses in a corporate malfeasance scenarios, as well as discourse attributed to the organization's CEO or other personnel. The experiment's subjects were exposed to a researcher-generated press release. The dependent variables assessed include attitude toward the organization, the credibility of the organization and the credibility of the message. It is hypothesized that DRT-based responses will produce significantly higher ratings than conventional bolstering responses.

Chapter 2 provides a literature review covering DRT in a crisis communication context, describes previous DRT research and briefly discusses competing crisis response theories. Chapter 2 concludes with hypotheses investigated via an experiment comparing press releases of differing content. Chapter 3 details the research methods used to test the hypotheses. Chapter 4 offers detailed statistical analysis. The research concludes with Chapter 5, Discussion. This last chapter describes the implications of DRT compared to other crisis communication theories, notes the limitations of the current research and suggests future research relating to DRT as a crisis communication strategy.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review begins with definitions of crisis and crisis communication followed by a review of theories suggesting strategic and tactical communication responses to various types of crises. Each theory suggests nuanced responses based upon the type of crisis facing the organization. Next, this chapter introduces the theory framework for this research: discourse of renewal theory (DRT), followed by a summary of research results derived from DRT. The chapter concludes with three hypotheses.

Defining Crisis and Crisis Communication

Most organizations realize that crises are increasingly common occurrences, independent of the organization type or the organization's business sector. For-profit and non-profit organizations are both likely to face a severe crisis demanding a well-structured, well-managed communication response. Crises are increasingly frequent in social, political, economic and environmental contexts, and present the potential of great harm to an organization and the organization's stakeholders, including employees. Seeger and his colleagues (1998) described a crisis as "a specific, unexpected and non-routine organizationally based event or series of events which creates high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organization's high priority goals (p233)." Coombs (2007b) emphasized the role of stakeholders, stating that a crisis is "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes (p2)." While a crisis may arise from any number of internal or external circumstances, common features of any crisis include ambiguity and uncertainty immediately following the crisis, as well

as a need for immediate response (even if complete information is unavailable). According to Barton (1993), every crisis has five stages: detection, prevention or preparation, containment, recovery, and learning. Organizations with pre-planned crisis prevention and crisis response plans suffer less financial and reputational damage than organizations without these plans (Heath, 2000). The magnitude of a crisis is best understood as a matter of personal, community, stakeholder and even cultural perception. The event's potential harm level should be considered before declaring the event a crisis. It is essential to ensure that the event threatens the organization's immediate stability or long-term functions (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

Coombs (2010) suggests crises arise as a function of perceptions based on violations of strongly held expectations. Therefore, an organization can face a crisis, despite having little or no involvement in creating the crisis. In 1993 Pepsi Cola faced a widespread crisis following media reports of product tampering. A swift investigative response from the U. S. Food and Drug Administration quickly confirmed that Pepsi was victimized by hoaxes and post-purchase tampering by consumers. Pepsi was exonerated of any liability or responsibility (Madigan, 1993). The research proposed here considers a crisis event to be one or several unpredictable and challenging circumstances that have major impact on the organization, industry, stakeholders or the whole community. The most severe crises could threaten the organization's viability. If the crisis is not adequately managed, the organization could dissolve and cease operations.

Crisis Communication Response Theories

Several theories suggest appropriate communication responses to an organizational crisis. Some theories suggest contingency-based responses rooted in the circumstances producing the crisis. In this section, several of these theories are briefly reviewed, including the theory perspectives of Benoit and Coombs.

Apologia

Apologia rhetorical theory originated in ancient Greece. Downey (1993) reports that the term apologia is a Greek word meaning self-defense. Beginning with classical rhetoric, apologia is one of the most enduring genres in communication. Ware and Linkugel (1973) defined apologia as a “distinct form of public address, a family of speeches with sufficient elements in common so as to warrant legitimately generic status” (p.273). Suggested apologia rhetorical responses are denial, bolstering, differentiation and transcendence. Despite its ancient roots, apologia is still considered an appropriate contemporary response under specific circumstances. Coombs (2010) recognizes the contemporary role of apologia, describing apologia as “a rhetorical concept that explores the use of communication for self-defense” (p. 30). The contingency-based perspectives suggested by crisis communication response theories are all rooted in the concept of apologia (Benoit, 2004, 1997; 1995; Hearit, 2010; Coombs, 2004; Coombs & Holladay, 2002).

Image Repair Theory

Benoit’s (1995) image repair theory (IRT) is recognized as one of the most widely applied theories of post-crisis communication (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Benoit initially called the theory image restoration, revising the term to image repair in subsequent research. The potential for image restoration is based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that communication is a goal-directed activity. As suggested by Benoit (2015), “image repair messages are clearly purposeful, intended to deal with threats to the communicator’s image.” The second assumption is that a key goal of communication is maintaining favorable reputation. When reputation and image are threatened, communicators should make efforts to get the organization out of the crisis situation as quickly as possible with as little damage to its

reputation and image as possible. These two assumptions provide the foundation of IRT and imply strategic responses to maintain and/or repair the organization's image and reputation. Crisis communication managers must consider the nature of the crisis faced by the organization and select appropriate response(s) from an array of strategic responses (Benoit & Dorries, 1996).

According to Benoit (1995), five general communication strategies are possible, including denial (repudiating the accusation or shifting the blame), evading responsibility (claiming a lack of responsibility), reducing the offensiveness of the event (bolstering the audience's positive affect; minimizing the unpleasantness of the offensive act; attacking the accuser; favorably comparing the act to similar, but more reprehensible, acts; placing the act in a larger, more desirable context), mortification (admitting the wrongful act and asking for forgiveness), and corrective action (correcting the problem). The appropriate response would be selected based upon the specific crisis the organization faces. Benoit's IRT has been investigated and proved useful in varied crisis communication circumstances (Reierson, 2009).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

Crisis communication as defined by Coombs (1995) includes all verbal and nonverbal information communicated by an organization regarding the crisis. Coombs (2010) suggests that crisis communication management proceeds in three stages: pre-crisis planning (on-going preparation for crisis communication), communication at the time of the crisis event, and post-crisis communication. Pre-crisis stage communication involves: 1) detecting potential crises and responding to them, 2) taking actions to prevent crises, and 3) preparation for the crisis-management process. Communication during the crisis includes: 1) understanding, collecting and processing the crisis information, 2) responding to stakeholders and addressing their concerns.

Post-crisis communication involves: 1) assuring stakeholders the organization is better prepared to respond to the next crisis, 2) making sure stakeholders are left with positive impressions of the organization, and 3) stressing that the crisis is truly over.

Coombs's SCCT differs from Benoit's IRT by offering a crisis communication strategy matrix. Appropriate strategies and tactics are selected by determining the organization's perceived level of responsibility for the crisis. As perceptions of the organization's responsibility increase, threats to the organization increase. If the organization is perceived as a victim (victim cluster), potential to withstand the crisis with minimal damage increases. The most severe threats to the organization occur in the preventable cluster. Here, the organization itself is considered the major cause of the crisis. The different clusters and examples of each type can be reviewed in Figure 1. Contingent responses include attacking the accuser, denying responsibility, ingratiating the organization to stakeholders, taking corrective action and full apology.

TABLE 1
Benoit's Image Restoration Strategies

Strategy	Option	Key Characteristic
Denial	Simple Denial	Did not perform the act
	Shift the blame	Provides alternate target to blame for act
Evasion of Responsibility	Provocation	Shifts some/all of responsibilities from accused to another
	Defeasibility	Accused cannot be held responsible due to a lack of control/information preceding situation
	Accident	Accident/mishap makes accused less accountable
Reduce Offensiveness of Act	Good Intentions	Accused performed act with good intentions, thereby evading full responsibility for outcome
	Bolstering	Seeking to strength the audience's positive feelings toward accused in attempt to offset negative feelings connected with wonderful act

	Minimize	Reduce damage to reputation by convincing audience that act is less offensive than originally thought
	Differentiation	Differentiate this act from other, more offensive acts
	Transcendence	Place act in more favorable context or suggest a different frame of reference to view the act
	Attack Accuser	Damage credibility of the source of allegations in attempt to limit damage to accused's image
	Compensation	Accused offers to reimburse victim to mitigate negative feelings from the act
Corrective Action	Correct the Problem	Accused promise to correct by offering to restore situation to pre-action state, or by promising to prevent recurrence of offensive act
Mortification	Confess & Accept Responsibility	Accused apologizes and seeks forgiveness

Note. From "Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Image Repair Strategies," by W.L. Benoit and S. Drew, 1997, *Communication Reports*, 10(2), 153-161.

Ethical Crisis Communication

Ethics perceptions are essential components to organizational credibility and should be considered during any crisis, independent of crisis type or the organization's strategies and tactics for crisis response. Post-crisis communication strategies are often designed to respond to and explain wrongdoing. Many organizations deliberately avoid assigning internal blame for the crisis as a precaution against future litigation. Responsibility, according to Sellnow and Seeger (2013), is "a general ethical concept that refers to that fact that individuals and groups have normal obligations and duties to others and to ethical codes, standards and traditions" (p. 223). Image restoration strategies used to deflect responsibility to insulate against associated legal liabilities have been criticized as unethical because these strategies can distort or confuse the situation (Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger, 2011). In contrast, accepting responsibility, including

taking actions to help victims, providing support and resources and helping alleviate and contain the harm, are considered generally ethical.

Heath and Ryan (1989) implied that ethical public relations is based upon responsible, professional and strategic communication management. Ulmer (1998) examined ethical post-crisis communication through three successful crisis communication cases. Ulmer's conclusions suggest that a strong emphasis on ethics can lead organizations to effective responses. While not overtly discussing a preferred ethical framework, DRT's emphasis on transparent, provisional communication delivered by the organization's most senior executive provides a basis for ethical decision making, thereby reassuring anxious stakeholders about the organization's commitment to growth after the crisis. Seeger and Ulmer (2002) also demonstrated the value of timely, ethical crisis communication. In two DRT-based crisis case studies, Malden Mills and Cole Hardwoods, Seeger & Ulmer report that timely communication focused on community values, employees and the organization's responsibility to rebuild and remain in the community were considered important and effective tactics that reduced uncertainty among local businesses, government officials, area suppliers and the firms' customers. Reducing uncertainty and restoring organizational confidence are key objectives of crisis communication (Ki, 2015). DRT is recommended not only for its effectiveness, but because of its basic ethical principles (Reiersen et al, 2009). The DRT characteristics of open, honest, and transparent communication, without denial, manipulation or blame assignment are often effective tactics for maintaining stakeholder relations (Hu, 2012). Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2011) also pointed out that organizations that maintain positive value before a crisis happens are best able to create renewal when crisis occurs. Conversely, if an organization failed to act in an ethical manner before the crisis, it is not likely to fully achieve the promised renewal.

Organizational Transparency

Organizational transparency, as suggested by Christensen and Cheney (2015), is usually defined as qualities of openness, insight and clarity that make organizations more accountable to relevant stakeholders. Most calls for transparency are demands for information. Organizations are under great pressure to making information accessible to stakeholders, including the media, as quickly as possible (Garsten & de Montoya, 2008). Christensen and Cheney (2015) described organizational transparency as a “double-sided concept” (p.76), suggesting that transparency could be either insight or blindness. No organization should assume anything about its operations is completely and perfectly assessed and transparent to all relevant stakeholders. Christensen and Cheney (2015) describe competing several tensions that promote or inhibit transparency: openness and closure, certainty and uncertainty, attention and ignorance, and participation and exclusion. These dialectics have important implications for transparent communication. Many organizations, public or private, rarely fully respond to information demands. Moreover, Christensen and Cheney pointed out that many organizations may not prefer transparent operations and/or communication. While transparency is often identified as social condition, the value resides primarily on the receiving end of transparency. Transparency is considered to be a genuinely democratic ideal; however, full transparency may paralyze society through excessive and even obsessive attention to the means of transparency itself.

When it comes to transparency in public relations, organizations must recognize and respect the stakeholders’ needs and interests. The organization is responsible for deciding how much information and what information to share, and whether the information significantly affects stakeholders (Ki, 2015). The organization should also consider the communication’s potential for harm. Communication managers should clients and organizations to be honest,

while simultaneously balancing stakeholder and organizational interests (Fitzpatrick 2006; Place 2010). Decisions regarding transparency should be guided by the relationship between the organization and its different stakeholders.

Discourse of Renewal Theory

The discourse of renewal theory (DRT) developed by Ulmer and Sellnow (2002) and extended by Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow (2007) suggests an alternative to IRT and SCCT. DRT originates from different assumptions, most notably that a crisis presents an organization with opportunities that might not arise without the crisis. Rather than stressing post-crisis communication designed to protect or insulate the organization, DRT “describes, explains, and prescribes how crisis communication should emphasize learning, growth, ethical communication, transformation, and opportunity” (Heath, 2013). Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2009) identify four theoretical objectives central to discourse of renewal: organizational learning, ethical communication, a prospective vision for the organization, and effective rhetoric.

DRT is a higher stage of organizational renewal, creating a post-crisis opportunity to re-order the organization down to its core purpose (Seeger et al., 2005). “While image restoration focuses on explaining and interpreting what has happened and who is at fault, renewal is concerned with what will happen and how the organization will move forward” (Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow, 2007). DRT also stresses the role of the organization’s chief executive, rather than other communication personnel. DRT suggests that organizations face the crisis with optimistic communication stressing the organization’s future. DRT emphasizes moving beyond the immediacy of the crisis by stressing a better future for the organization as a result of the crisis (Hu, 2012).

Four Characteristics of Renewal

Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2007) identify four key DRT characteristics: (1) DRT is provisional as opposed to strategic, (2) DRT is prospective rather than retrospective, (3) the crisis represents opportunity for positive change, and (4) DRT is leader-based communication delivered by the organization's most senior leadership. Each of these characteristics is described below.

First, renewal is provisional, thus the organization should not expect current operations to be permanent. Renewal is an on-going process. Consequently, communication about post-crisis renewal will be an on-going process. Instead of crafting communication responses to gain strategic outcomes, DRT encourages the organization to respond in an immediate, natural manner (Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow, 2007). All responses should derive from the values of the organization and its leader. Communication should address a broad array of stakeholders, not just the stakeholders most immediately impacted by the crisis.

The second characteristic described by Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow (2007) is that DRT-based communication is prospective rather than retrospective. Compared to image restoration, which focuses on what has happened and assigning blame, DRT is concerned with what will happen and how the organization plans to respond to the crisis and move forward. The third DRT characteristic emphasizes optimism, rather than pessimism. Optimistic communication inspires stakeholders. Similarly, crises are optimistically viewed as opportunities to critique previous operations, consider alternatives and establish stronger operations and controls to prevent future crises. For example, if the crisis is based on a technical failure, the organization may improve its technical infrastructure (Seeger and Ulmer, 2002).

The final DRT characteristic is leader-based communication. DRT demands that post-crisis communication be delivered by the organization's leader, often the chief executive officer. Leaders are credible, "instrumental forces for overcoming crisis" (Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow, 2007). Leaders are critical because they can forcefully articulate organizational values. These leaders are considered more trustworthy and credible than trained communicators speaking on the organization's behalf.

Conditions for DRT Responses

Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow (2007) suggest the organization's ability to enact post-crisis DRT is contingent upon prior positive stakeholder relationships, faith in corrective action and organization type. First, they contend that massively destructive natural disasters, such as fires and floods, create a context and a physical space where renewal can occur. Second, they believe that organizations with prior positive stakeholder relationships are more likely to gain support for renewal compared to organizations with negative relationships. However, in some crises, the events can create goodwill and encourage stakeholders to cooperate with the organization, even though its pre-event reputation was not particularly positive (Seeger et al., 2005). Also, commitment, actions and changes after the crisis are essential for effective DRT. Finally, they suggest that privately owned organizations might find it easier to adopt DRT than publicly owned corporations, since privately owned organizations may be able to exercise more independence, as well as possessing a strong culture of entrepreneurial spirit and pride.

DRT Research Findings

The DRT renewal process has been researched via case studies, especially following debilitating industrial fires at Malden Mills and Cole Hardwoods. The DRT framework also guided a post-9/11 case study of Cantor Fitzgerald following catastrophic losses of personnel and

facilities as a result of that day's terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. Barone (2014) case studied three education organizations to assess the efficacy of DRT-based communication.

Seeger & Ulmer (2002) published the results of two case studies following two large-scale industrial crises. Malden Mills, a textile firm based in Lawrence, Massachusetts and Cole Hardwoods of Logansport, Indiana both experienced crippling fires that destroyed the production capacity of both companies. Case studies of both crises included reviewing media coverage of both events, interviews with the CEOs of each company (Aaron Feuerstein of Malden Mills and Milt Cole of Cole Hardwood) and interviews with other relevant stakeholders. DRT assumptions were confirmed in these cases. The crises faced by Malden and Cole were industrial fires of indeterminate cause. This type of crisis may be more amenable to DRT responses than other crises: "fires... create strong emotional responses to people to rebuild... This rebuilding typically focuses on what is best for the community as a whole, rather than a strategic response that favors only a few" (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007, p132). Both companies were family owned, so both CEOs were not pressured by stockholders or boards of directors. The CEOs were able to respond independently to the crisis. Both companies had long-standing community involvement resulting in goodwill toward the companies as they pursued renewal strategies. Both companies involved suppliers, customers and employees in their post-crisis communication and plant-renewal strategies, including revising production timelines and compensating displaced employees during the extensive rebuilding phases. Both CEOs steered communication away from discussions of liability, cause, blame, etc. Each CEO stressed an immediate commitment to rebuild facilities and optimistic perspectives for a revitalized organization. Seeger & Ulmer (2002) report "... the post-crisis discourse of renewal examined here focuses on the future, how

previous limitations can be overcome and what new opportunities can be explored” (p137). “The primary story of a crisis need not in all cases be about cause, blame and harm” (p140).

Seeger et al. (2005) conducted a DRT-based case study examining the post 9/11 communication of the bond-trading firm, Cantor Fitzgerald (CF), and its CEO Howard Lutnick. CF is an international brokerage firm that operated from Tower One of the World Trade Center. When the plane struck the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, most of CF’s employees died. Lutnick, became CF’s tragic face. Unlike Malden Mills and Cole Hardwood, CF could not draw upon a decades-long record of corporate social responsibility. CF was perceived as the most ruthless competitor in one of the country’s most ruthless business sectors.

Lutnick’s personal reputation was also questionable. There were lingering concerns about how he assumed control of CF upon the founder’s death. Lutnick quickly responded through media by documenting the scale of harm suffered by CF. All 700 CF employees present in the office were killed. Another 300 survived because of tardiness, being out of the building on other business, vacations, etc. Lutnick’s brother died in the attack. Lutnick survived because he attended an activity at his child’s school. Lutnick’s emotional, transparent communication responses immediately developed goodwill that could be used to support organizational renewal. Lutnick’s post-crisis response “create(d) a new sense of normal and constitute(d) compelling and meaningful discourses that promote(d) cooperation, support and renewal.”

Another DRT-based case study investigated community restoration. Littlefield et al. (2009) researched the aftermath of a school shooting at Red Lake Senior High School in Red Lake, Minnesota. A 16-year-old Native American student shot a security guard, a teacher, and five students before committing suicide. The situation was complicated by the shooter being the son of a high-profile member of a local Native American tribe. Little et al. found that although

most DRT-related research demonstrated the influential status of organizational leaders, “renewal in this instance was enacted by individuals within the community at their own levels of power and influences.” In the absence of a CEO to represent a single organization, multiple people in different organizations assumed post-crisis public leadership roles.

Barone’s (2014) research details three case studies of universities facing different crises. DRT was used to assess the crisis communications responses of each university. Wilson College, a private liberal arts college in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania faced a serious financial crisis following decades of declining enrollment. Wilson College responded by developing a strategic plan to revitalize the College and hired a new president to enact the plan. Barone’s analysis indicates that the new president’s messages were not spontaneous or provisional, contrary to DRT. Barone suggests this finding may be related to the president’s responsibility to answer to the College’s board of directors. DRT suggests independent, autonomous leaders are more likely to succeed with DRT strategies and tactics. Other DRT tenets were observed and confirmed, including prospective, forward-looking messages. Ultimately, the Wilson College case study results are inconclusive. Barone suggests the lack of leader autonomy and crisis type (long-term financial) may be inappropriate scenarios for DRT responses. Wilson College still faced significant financial challenges at the conclusion of Barone’s research.

Barone’s (2014) second case involves a series of arson-started fires at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina. Subsequently, law enforcement arrested a WCU student for starting fires in WCU buildings. Barone assessed the crisis communication responses using the best practices recommended by DRT and concluded that DRT was successfully applied. WCU’s highest-ranking official, chancellor John Bardo, emerged as the organizational face of the crisis. Bardo delivered transparent, optimistic, provisional, prospective messages after

each fire. Barone concludes that Bardo's DRT-based response calmed WCU and the surrounding community. Upon his retirement, Bardo was commended for his exceptional response and leadership qualities.

Barone's (2014) final case study investigated communication surrounding Hurricane Katrina's disruption of Tulane University (New Orleans) in August 2005 following Hurricane Katrina. Tulane University president Scott Cowen emerged as the University's main communicator during the immediate crisis and remained a prime communication source in Katrina's aftermath. Cowen traveled the country meeting with concerned alumni, prospective students and concerned parents. Cowen emphasized physical and organizational renewal in the storm's aftermath, especially stressing Tulane's long-term commitment to public service prior to the storm and how that commitment was being carried over into post-storm activities. Despite Hurricane Katrina, Tulane successfully completed the 2005-2006 academic year. In the following years, admissions applications increased, as did enrollment. Enrollment increased by 55 percent in 2006, the first year following Hurricane Katrina, and "a staggering 39,763 high school senior applications for 1,400 freshman seats" were submitted for the freshman class beginning in Fall 2009 (p 115). Barone concludes that Cowen's prospective, optimistic, transparent, provisional and leader-based messages successfully guided Tulane University through the crisis. Barone also notes that the crisis type, natural disaster, is the type of crisis that can spontaneously generate stakeholder goodwill.

Research Hypotheses

The DRT research results presented in this chapter are consistent; DRT works under specific circumstances. However, all the results reported thus far derive from subjective case studies. DRT researchers offer definitive statements regarding when DRT is an appropriate crisis

communication response. However, DRT is unclear about what constitutes a successful crisis communication program, as well as how to assess results. Still, since DRT is presented as a comprehensive theory, it should be subjected to rigorous experimental research based upon hypotheses derived from DRT. Therefore, this research proposes an experiment testing the hypotheses detailed below.

To date, there appears to be no formal test of DRT-based crisis communication responses to strategies or tactics suggested by alternative crisis response theories. Comprehensively comparing DRT against these many other strategies and tactics is not possible. This research proposes testing post-crisis, DRT-based communication against bolstering, one of Benoit's (1995) recommended strategies.

H1: When compared to post-crisis communication statements containing organization bolstering responses, post-crisis communication statements containing DRT-based responses will produce significantly higher (a) attitude toward the organization, (b) message credibility, and (c) organization credibility.

DRT theorizes that the organization's highest-ranking leader should be the primary post-crisis communicator. The CEO is likely to be a more credible embodiment of the organization's values than other communicators associated with the organization, especially when compared to unnamed public relations personnel. "... leaders capitalize on their reputation to inspire renewal... The strength, vision and reputation of a formal leader are necessary conditions for renewal. Leaders play a critical role in renewal because they embody the company and its values (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007, p 133). DRT's insistence on CEO primacy suggests the following hypothesis:

H2: When compared to the organization's other communications personnel, post-crisis communication attributed to the organization's CEO will produce significantly higher (a) attitude toward the organization, (b) message credibility and (c) organizational credibility scores.

One of DRT's strongest contentions is the visibility of the chief executive officer as most superior information source delivering transparent, provisional, forward-looking DRT-based responses. The CEO is assumed to be the best embodiment of the organization's goals, objectives, values and mission. Placing the CEO in high-profile communication and visibility positions should provide a reassuring presence and stability that can't be matched by other communicators within the organization. This DRT assumption suggests a third hypothesis:

H3: Crisis responses employing DRT principles attributed to the organization's CEO will generate significantly higher mean attitude toward the organization, message credibility and organizational credibility scores than the same message delivered by another communicator within the organization.

CHAPTER 3 METHOD

This chapter describes the research method proposed to investigate the hypotheses described at the conclusion of the previous chapter. The experiment described here is the first-known effort to empirically test DRT's assumptions concerning the value of the CEO as a crisis communicator, the type of crisis that can be addressed by DRT and alternatives to DRT crisis communication prescriptions. In the following sections, experimental treatments are described, subject selection and recruitment are addressed and operationalization are detailed for each of the experiment's dependent variables.

Treatments

The method proposed for this research is a 2 (CEO communicator/non-CEO communicator) x 2 (DRT-based statement/organization bolstering statement) experiment. The organization selected for research is Doctors Without Borders (DWB), a not-for-profit international medical services organization treating patients in the world's most violent, underserved areas. The researcher prepared fabricated press releases addressing a crisis of financial malfeasance committed by a DWB employee. The press releases begin and end with identical copy. The middle portion of the release includes a statement (DRT-based or bolstering). The statement is attributed to the CEO or another communicator in the organization. The DRT-based condition describes what DWB learned as a result of the crisis and how the organization plans to improve future operations. The bolstering condition does not include these details. Instead, the bolstering condition describes how DWB works to deliver medical services to endangered, under-served populations. The 2 x 2 design results in the following treatments:

1. DRT-based, malfeasance, CEO attribution
2. Bolstering, malfeasance, CEO attribution
3. DRT-based, malfeasance, non-CEO attribution
4. Bolstering, malfeasance, non-CEO attribution

The treatment press releases can be reviewed in Appendix.

Dependent Variables Assessments

This research proposes three dependent variables likely to be impacted by post-crisis communication: attitude toward the organization, message credibility and organization credibility. Each variable will be assessed independently using an interval-level scale.

The three-item attitude toward the organization scale is derived from Chan & Lau (2004). Each pair of bi-polar adjectives is assessed on a seven-point scale. Scores for the three items are summed to produce a mean attitude toward the organization score. The three items are bad/good, unfavorable/favorable and negative/positive.

Lichtenstein & Bearden's (1989) message credibility scale consists of five items measured along a seven-point scale. Scores for the five items are summed to produce a mean score for message credibility. The items are insincere/sincere, dishonest/honest, not trustworthy/trustworthy, dependable/not dependable and unreliable/reliable.

Four items are used to assess the organization credibility variable (Till & Busler, 2000). Each pair of bi-polar adjectives is assessed on a seven-point scale. Scores for the four items are summed to produce a mean organization credibility score. The four items are insincere/sincere, dishonest/honest, not dependable/dependable and not trustworthy/trustworthy.

In addition to these dependent variables, respondent demographics will be collected, including the respondent's sex and year of birth.

Subject Selection

Following review and approval of the research protocol by University of Alabama Institutional Review Board (IRB), subjects were recruited from the College of Communication and Information Sciences (CIS) Committee for the Allocation of Research Participants (CARP) program (see Appendix B). Students in this database are enrolled in CIS undergraduate courses. The respondent's instructor may offer incentive to participate in the research (extra course credit or using the research to satisfy a course participation requirement). The researcher provided no direct compensation to participating research subjects. Prior to participation, each subject reviewed and agreed to an informed consent screen. Subjects were advised of their rights as research participants, including the right to refuse participation or to withdraw participation without penalty at any point in the research process. Subjects agreeing to participate were randomly assigned to one of the four press release treatments. Subject anonymity was maintained by the CARP system. The CARP system reported student participation to course instructors. The researcher had no way of linking specific responses to specific respondents. Data were aggregated for testing and reporting purposes.

Respondents were advised that the researcher is seeking opinions about how people perceive an organization in crisis. Subjects were not aware that DRT was being tested. Following a review of the press release, subjects completed the dependent variables assessments and demographic items. Subjects were debriefed prior to final data submission and informed that the scenario detailed in the press release was fictional and was used for research purposes only. (DWB has never been accused of financial malfeasance.) Subjects were then advised of the right to withdraw data without penalty. None of the participating subjects withdrew responses.

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

Chapter 1 offered a brief overview of the importance of organizational responses during a crisis situation, an introduction to discourse of renewal theory (DRT) and presented a rationale for the current research. Chapter 2 described how crisis response theory has developed in the PR industry and research literature, beginning with its roots in classical rhetoric. Chapter 2 also included a review of the limited DRT-based research, noting the research's reliance on case study methods. Chapter 2 concluded with research hypotheses to be tested via experimental methods. Chapter 3 described the methods used to test the hypotheses. In this chapter, the hypotheses are investigated via statistical tests.

TABLE 2
Demographics

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	38	33.3
Female	76	66.7
Ethnicity		
White	94	82.5
Black or African American	14	12.3
Other	5	4.4
Missing	1	0.9
Group Total	114	100

A total of 114 University of Alabama students completed the experiment. Most of these students were White females with a mean age of approximately 21 years old. Thirty-three percent of the participants were men (38) and 67% were women (76). All subjects were enrolled in College of Communication and Information Sciences courses during the 2017 Spring semester. A full demographic profile can be viewed in Table 2.

While the 114 subjects were not randomly selected, subjects were randomly assigned to one of four treatment groups. Subjects in all treatment groups read a press release concerning an embezzlement crisis faced by Doctors Without Borders (DWB). Source attribution and response type varied by press release. Treatment group 1 subjects read a press release with a bolstering crisis response attributed to the Doctors Without Borders (DWB) chief executive officer. A total of 27 (24%) subjects were assigned to treatment 1. In treatment 2, subjects read a press release with a DRT crisis response attributed to the DWB chief executive officer. A total of 30 (26%) subjects were assigned to this treatment. In treatment 3, subjects read a press release with a bolstering crisis response attributed to a named DWB spokesperson other than the chief executive officer. A total of 29 (25%) subjects were assigned to this treatment. In treatment 4, subjects read a press release with a DRT crisis response attributed to a named DWB spokesperson other than the chief executive officer. A total of 28 (25%) respondents were assigned to this treatment. This design allowed comparison of response type (bolstering or DRT), as well as the message source (chief executive officer or named DWB spokesperson). After reading the press release, subjects completed a three-item attitude toward the organization scale, a five-item message credibility scale, and a four-item organization credibility scale. All attitude assessments were made using a seven-point scale. Scale items were summed and divided to

provide a mean score for each of the four treatment groups. The experiment concluded with a self report of the subject's sex, race and year of birth (used to calculate age).

Comparing DRT and Bolstering Responses

DRT suggests responses stressing organizational learning while minimizing blame attributions are preferred to bolstering responses. Therefore, hypothesis 1 predicted that a DRT response absent crisis blame assignment, along with descriptions of what the organization learned and how the organization plans to improve as a result of the crisis, will produce significantly higher mean attitude toward the organization, message credibility and organization credibility scores than will a bolstering crisis response. This hypothesis was tested by disregarding the source attributed in the press release and aggregating subjects by the type of response the subject viewed. This resulted in a bolstering attitude toward the organization mean score of 5.07 (sd = 1.21, n = 55). The DRT mean for this variable is 4.62 (sd = 1.19, n = 59). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = .23$, $p = .64$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test confirmed a statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = 2.03$, $p = .02$, $df = 112$). Contrary to hypothesis 1, the bolstering response mean is significantly higher than the DRT response mean. When message credibility is considered, the bolstering attitude toward the message mean score is 4.71 (sd = .94, n = 55). The DRT mean for message credibility is 4.79 (sd = 1.00, n = 59). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = .41$, $p = .52$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test indicates no statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -.48$, $p = .32$, $df = 112$). The organization credibility mean for subjects viewing the bolstering response is 4.95 (sd = 1.19, n = 55), while the mean for subjects viewing the DRT response is 4.78 (sd = 1.25, n = 59). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test

confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = .23, p = .63$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test indicates no statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = .73, p = .23, df = 112$). Overall, hypothesis 1 is rejected. The bolstering response produced a significantly higher attitude toward the organization score, however this results contradicts the hypothesized outcome. Mean message credibility and mean organization credibility scores are not significantly different. DRT did not outperform the bolstering response on any of the observed dependent variables.

Source Attribution Responses

DRT notes that as the personification of the organization's values, the chief executive officer should be the most reliable, trusted information source during a crisis. Therefore, hypothesis 2 predicted that responses attributed to the chief executive officer should produce significantly higher mean attitude toward the organization, message credibility and organization credibility scores than messages attributed to organization personnel other than the chief executive. This hypothesis was tested by sorting subjects into two groups (chief executive source and non-chief executive source), and testing for significant mean differences.

When considering only the source attribution, the information attributed to the chief executive produced an attitude toward the organization mean score of 4.57 ($sd = 1.13, n = 57$), while the non-chief executive source mean is 5.10 ($sd = 1.13, n = 57$). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = 2.10, p = .15$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test confirmed a statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -2.35, p = .01, df = 112$). Contrary to hypothesis 2, information attributed to a source other than the chief executive produced a significantly higher mean than information attributed to the chief executive. When message credibility is considered, the chief executive's

mean score is 4.65 (sd = .1.27, n = 57) compared to the non-chief executive's mean of 4.86 (sd = 1.03, n = 57). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = 1.57, p = .21$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test indicates no statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -1.17, p = .12, df = 112$). The organization credibility mean for subjects viewing the chief executive attribution is 4.58 (sd = 1.24, n= 57), while the mean for subjects viewing the non-chief executive officer release is 5.14 (sd = 1.14, n = 59). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = .07, p = .79$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test indicates a statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -2.52, p = .005, df = 112$). Contrary to the hypothesis, the non-chief executive attribution produced a significantly higher organization credibility score. Overall, hypothesis 2 is rejected. Press releases attributing information to the chief executive officer did not produce significantly higher mean attitude toward the organization, message credibility and organization credibility scores. Information attributed to the chief executive officer did not outperform information attributed to another source within the organization.

Response Type and Source Attribution

Hypothesis 3 is perhaps the best test of DRT theorizing. It was hypothesized that the highest mean attitude toward the organization, message credibility and organization credibility scores would be observed when the chief executive delivers a DRT-based crisis response. This hypothesis was tested by comparing between-group mean scores based upon the source attributed in the press release while simultaneously controlling for the response type. In the first comparison, subjects viewing a chief executive's DRT response are compared to subjects

viewing the same response attributed to another communication source associated with the organization (non-chief executive).

In the chief executive/DRT condition, the mean attitude toward the organization score is 4.39 (sd = 1.12, n = 30), while the non-chief executive/DRT mean is 4.80 (sd = 1.23, n = 28). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = .12$, $p = .73$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test did not confirm a statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -1.33$, $p = .10$, $df = 56$). When message credibility is considered, the mean chief executive/DRT attitude toward the message score is 4.69 (sd = .94, n = 30). The non-chief executive/DRT mean for message credibility is 4.91 (sd = 1.08, n = 28). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = .64$, $p = .44$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test indicates no statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -.83$, $p = .20$, $df = 56$). The mean organization credibility score for subjects viewing the chief executive/DRT response is 4.58 (sd = 1.31, n = 30), while the mean for subjects viewing the non-chief executive/DRT response is 4.96 (sd = 1.16, n = 28). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = .001$, $p = .97$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test indicates no statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -1.14$, $p = .13$, $df = 56$). No significant differences are observed for mean attitude toward the organization, message credibility or organization credibility scores based upon source attribution when controlling for response type. DRT responses appear equally effective when delivered by the chief executive or another source within the organization.

A test of hypothesis 3 also included an assessment of the bolstering crisis response, controlling for source attribution. In the chief executive/bolstering condition, the mean attitude

toward the organization score is 4.78 (sd = 1.11, n = 27), while the non-CEO/bolstering mean is 5.39 (sd = 1.26, n = 29). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = .97$, $p = .33$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test confirmed a statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -1.93$, $p = .03$, $df = 54$). Contrary to the hypothesis, the non-CEO/bolstering response produced a significantly higher mean attitude toward the organization score. When message credibility is considered, the mean chief executive/bolstering attitude toward the message score is 4.60 (sd = .85, n = 27). The non-chief executive/bolstering mean for message credibility is 4.81 (sd = 1.00, n = 29). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = 1.08$, $p = .30$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test indicates no statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -.83$, $p = .20$, $df = 54$). The mean organization credibility score for subjects viewing the chief executive/ bolstering response is 4.58 (sd = 1.18, n = 27), while the mean for subjects viewing the non-chief executive/bolstering response is 5.33 (sd = 1.10, n = 29). An a priori Levene's Equality of Variances test confirmed the homoscedasticity assumption ($F = .18$, $p = .68$). An equal variances assumed, one-tailed t-test indicates a statistically significant difference between the group means ($t = -2.44$, $p = .02$, $df = 54$). Contrary to the hypothesis, the non-chief executive bolstering response produced a significantly higher mean attitude toward the organization score. Overall, there is no support for hypothesis 3. Bolstering responses attributed to the chief executive produced significantly lower attitude toward the organization and organization credibility scores when compared to the non-chief executive source.

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

Chapter 1 offered a brief overview of the importance of organizational responses during a crisis situation, an introduction to discourse of renewal theory (DRT) and presented a rationale for the current research. Chapter 2 described how crisis response theory has developed in the PR industry and research literature, beginning with its roots in classical rhetoric. Chapter 2 also included a review of the limited DRT-based research, noting the research's reliance on case study methods. Chapter 2 concluded with research hypotheses to be tested via experiment. Chapter 3 described the methods used to test the hypotheses. Chapter 4 reported the results of statistical hypothesis tests. In this chapter, the results are discussed and contextualized, research limitations are considered and recommendations for future research are offered.

The experiment conducted in this research is the first-known investigation of a financial crisis using a DRT-based crisis response. Additionally, Doctors Without Borders is an international nonprofit organization delivering humanitarian and medical assistance. Therefore, this experiment is the first to test DRT in an international context, as well being the first investigation of a crisis originating within an organization. Varying the organization's spokesperson, comparing the organization's CEO to a non-CEO public relations practitioner, also represents a first DRT analysis. The results of this experiment indicate that DRT may be no more effective than more conventional crisis communication strategies and tactics. Despite these non-significant results, useful recommendations can be made to organizations and public relations professionals considering DRT responses to crises.

DRT is suggested as a crisis communication alternative to more standard apologia-based responses. DRT stresses the superiority of communication from the highest echelons of the organization (rather than from other personnel), provisional communication (rather than planned responses culled from contingency plans), avoiding blame assignment for the crisis (as compared to responses deflecting blame and remaining ambiguous as to the source of the crisis so as to avoid legal liability), stressing the organization's fundamental values and mission, and forward-looking statements of lessons learned from the current crisis. Several case studies identified DRT successes under a few crisis circumstances (terrorism, industrial fires and a hurricane). This thesis is the first-known attempt to compare DRT-based responses to a more common crisis response, organizational bolstering. In direct experimental comparison, DRT-based tactical responses did not generate superior attitude toward the organization, message credibility or organizational credibility when compared to bolstering responses. In fact, bolstering produced significantly better results than DRT. Still, the failure to support the hypotheses tested here does not undermine the potential efficacy of a DRT crisis response.

DRT's primary theorists note that DRT might not be the best response to all crisis types. They suggest DRT may be the best alternative when the crisis is perceived as beyond the organization's control, e.g. the industrial fires, hurricane and terrorism crises detailed in Chapter 2. These crises produced visible devastation, and all these crises originated outside the organization. Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger (2007) suggest "...disasters such as fires and floods often clear away physical impediments to renewal, creating a space where renewal can occur" (p133). However, the financial malfeasance crisis tested in this research located the crisis within the organization itself. An internal crisis doesn't clear physical space where renewal can be publicly observed. DRT might be a better alternative to bolstering when physical renewal can be

observed following communication responses stressing a commitment to physically rebuild infrastructure. The Malden Mills and Cole Hardwoods industrial fires, as well as Tulane University's response to Hurricane Katrina, provided opportunities for stakeholders to observe rebuilding efforts. In Barone's (2014) case studies, communication surrounding the financial crisis associated with a private, liberal arts college (an internal crisis) did not appear to be lessened by a DRT strategy. Organizations considering DRT-based crisis responses should carefully review the crisis circumstances and evaluate the potential for an effective DRT strategy. The crisis type should be considered first. The cumulative DRT research indicates that DRT is a better response when the crisis is external to the organization, such as a fire, storm, terrorism, etc. If the crisis originates inside the organization, other strategies may be preferred to DRT.

DRT also stresses the superiority of the chief executive officer's communication role during a crisis. However, in the experiment reported here, the CEO-attributed response was no more effective than the same message attributed to a communication professional within the organization. If the CEO is to be perceived as the embodiment of the organization, then communication recipients will need a context for assessing the CEO. If the organization is unknown and its values are unclear, the CEO-attributed response cannot be adequately assessed. Without this awareness, CEO embodiment isn't possible. Therefore, crisis communication planners should consider the CEO's ability to function as a potential spokesperson during a crisis scenario. Does the CEO have the personal dynamism, public speaking skills, credibility and other experience that would make the CEO appear to be a calming, credible spokesperson? If the CEO is unable or unwilling to assume this role, DRT responses may be less effective.

Seeger (2011) also pointed out that organizations establishing positive organizational

values prior to a crisis are best able to create renewal following a crisis. Conversely, if an organization failed to act in an ethical manner before the crisis, it is not likely to fully achieve the promised renewal. This suggests that DRT might be more effective when the organization has laid an ethical foundation over the long term. When a crisis strikes, as with Malden Mills and Cole Hardwoods, a reservoir of goodwill in the home communities may have helped sustain the organization during the renewal process. Previous DRT research noted the decades-long community involvement of both Malden Mills and Cole Hardwoods. When both organizations responded with renewal strategies, stakeholders felt confident about the post-crisis communication. Previous case study research investigated DRT responses to organizations with good reputations for public service, stable employee relations and high levels of local visibility. If these characteristics aren't associated with the organization prior to the crisis, DRT alternatives should be considered. The subjects completing this thesis research may have been unfamiliar with Doctors Without Borders. Without a reservoir of goodwill and a reputation for credible, ethical performance, the DRT-based response may have seemed less credible than a bolstering response describing DWB's mission in heroic terms.

As discussed in the literature review, the value of accepting responsibility for the crisis is an important element of ethical, transparent crisis response. However, DRT stresses avoiding discussion of responsibility as part of the organization's forward-looking response. (Assigning blame or responsibility for the crisis would be considered retrospective activities, compared to DRT's prospective activities.) Despite this DRT recommendation, DRT should not be considered as an unethical, non-transparent crisis response. DRT suggests keeping all stakeholders focused on a better future as a result of the crisis, independent of responsibility for the crisis.

Limitations

As alluded to in the previous sections of this chapter, there are several limitations to consider. First, student participants unfamiliar with DWB suggests potential validity problems. As a practical matter, these subjects weren't DWB stakeholders. This research's subjects may not have felt any anxiety regarding DWB's future following a malfeasance crisis. A second subject factor may also have influenced these results. These student participants were enrolled in courses offered in UA's College of Communication and Information Sciences. CIS houses a nationally prominent public relations program, and the majority of CIS students major in this public relations program. Students participating in this research may have more affinity for the public relations profession. Consequently, they may have scrutinized the releases more closely than typical respondents. If they envision themselves as future spokespersons for organizations, the subjects may have shown more preference for the spokesperson-attributed messages.

Another limitation concerns the experimental method as a DRT research tactic. The research conducted here used a between-subjects, post-exposure design. There was no pre-test of student attitudes toward DWB prior to exposure, nor was a control group used as a baseline comparison. The cross-sectional nature of this research experiment provides dependent variables assessment at a single point in time. The case studies used to develop and investigate DRT stress the long-term implications of renewal. Malden Mills and Cole Hardwoods spent years relaunching their businesses after extremely debilitating fires. DRT effects may not be visible in the immediate aftermath of a crisis. A single experiment may be unable to observe short-term DRT effects.

A third consideration for limitations is the comparison made between bolstering and DRT. As a practical matter, it would be impossible to compare various DRT responses to the

many crisis communication alternatives suggested by Benoit (2015) and Coombs (2010). While the bolstering response tested here bested the DRT response, DRT might be a superior alternative to response strategies other than bolstering, even under the malfeasance scenario tested here.

Finally, the change of CEOs' public perception should be considered. DRT was conceptualized in the early to mid 2000s. Since then, public perceptions of CEOs may have changed. According to Duncan (2017), only one third of the public believes that CEOs are credible. Therefore, CEO-based crisis communication may not be as trustworthy today as in prior years. DRT theorists may re-consider the value of the CEO. Additionally, a dynamic, media-savvy CEO might be a successful DRT communicator. A less effective CEO might undermine sound DRT responses.

Future Research

There are many research alternatives available for DRT investigators. Future research should be conducted on a more representative, generalizable sample. The most valid research subjects would be stakeholders of an organization in the middle of or just following a crisis. Apologia strategies other than bolstering should be investigated, along with continued comparison of internally caused and externally caused crises. More rigorous experimental research designs could be used, including control groups. If subjects are unfamiliar with an organization, pre-exposure manipulations could be used to provide background details likely to generate familiarity or involvement with the organization. Similarly, CEO profiles or biographical sketches could be used to familiarize these high-ranking executives to potential research subjects. Longitudinal designs can track attitude development and change over time to see if relevant stakeholders respond to DRT strategies and tactics.

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APPENDIX A: TREATMENTS FOR THE EXPERIMENT



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Jim Frank
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DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS RESPONDS TO EMBEZZLEMENT CHARGES

\$10 million (US) stolen by employee
Chief executive officer defends group's reputation for humanitarian
service

New York City, Jan. 15, 2017 - One of the world's largest humanitarian aid organizations, Doctors Without Borders, announced that \$10 million (US) was embezzled by an employee. A full financial audit and investigation into the theft is being conducted by an international accounting firm.

Raymond Cole is the chief executive officer for Doctors Without Borders. Cole released

a statement noting the organization’s commitment to medical service. “Doctors Without Borders is one of the world’s most-respected humanitarian organizations. Our physicians provide the highest standards of medical care to the world’s most vulnerable people. Each day Doctors Without Borders treats patients suffering with malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, cholera and other medical problems. Many of these patients don’t have access to quality medical care.

“Doctors Without Borders provides medical care in conflict areas. In the past 10 years, there has been a blurring of humanitarian aid and military interventions. Humanitarian aid workers have been directly targeted making it more difficult for us to work in high-risk areas. Gaining access to people cut off from assistance in armed conflicts due to insecurity, government bureaucracies, and other blockages is not always easy, but Doctors Without Borders is committed to this mission.”

Doctors Without Borders is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt medical humanitarian organization founded in 1971. Doctors Without Borders is an independent group unaffiliated with any specific government or religious organization. Doctors Without Borders currently employs 36,482 people providing medical services in more than 70 countries worldwide.

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DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

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\$10 million (US) stolen by employee
Chief executive officer vows to reform group's financial operations

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Raymond Cole is the chief executive officer for Doctors Without Borders. Cole released a statement concerning the theft and investigation. "Doctors Without Borders is one of the world's most-respected humanitarian organizations. We are committed to providing transparent, ethical medical service to the world's most vulnerable people. This incident upsets our donors and embarrasses our international network of employees and other partners.

"However, this incident offers Doctors Without Borders an opportunity to improve our

financial operations. We learned that employees working with finances need more managerial oversight. We also discovered a need to update our technology systems for managing and transferring funds. We will transform how we track and manage money. I am committed to rebuilding our financial management processes to prevent future problems. I am confident that Doctors Without Borders will emerge as a more productive, committed group dedicated to our core values of independent medical service without regard to political, economic or religious affiliations.”

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Raymond Cole is a spokesperson for Doctors Without Borders. Cole released a statement noting the organization's commitment to medical service. "Doctors Without Borders is one of the world's most-respected humanitarian organizations. Our physicians provide the highest standards of medical care to the world's most vulnerable people. Each day Doctors Without Borders treats patients suffering with malnutrition, HIV/AIDS, cholera and other medical problems. Many of these patients don't have access to quality medical care.

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APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



February 22, 2017

Lance Kinney, Ph.D.
Department of Advertising & Public Relations
College of Communication & Information Sciences
Box 870172

Re: IRB # 17-OR-079, "Comparing Discourse of Renewal Theory to Standard Public Relations Apologia: An Experimental Investigation"

Dear Dr. Kinney:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of one element of informed consent and waiver of written documentation of informed consent. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your application will expire on February 21, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Stuart Usdan, Ph.D.
Chair, Non-Medical IRB
The University of Alabama

AAHRPP Document # 139

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTIONS PROGRAM

GUIDANCE: TEMPLATE FOR STUDY PRESENTATIONS FOR WEB SURVEYS

Research Invitation

Dr. Lance Kinney, Principal Investigator from the University of Alabama, is conducting a study called "How Organizations Respond to Crisis Situations." He wishes to learn how an organization should communicate with the public following a crisis.

Taking part in this study involves completing a web survey that will take about 15 minutes. This survey contains questions about what different people think about how an organization handles a crisis faced by the organization.

We will protect your confidentiality by summarizing all the results so no one can be identified. We will not ask for your name, CWID, names of your professors, etc. Only Dr. Kinney will have access to the data. The data are protected on Dr. Kinney's computer, and he is the only person with access to the computer. Only summarized data will be presented at meetings or in publications.

There will be no direct financial benefits to you for participating. One of your course instructors may give you course credit for participating. Your professor will be notified that you participated, but your professor will not see your answers to any of the research items. The findings will be useful to organizations, businesses, etc., as the results can help groups understand how to communicate with news media about a crisis.

The chief risk is that some of the questions may make you uncomfortable. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer.

If you have questions about this study, please contact Dr. Kinney at (205) 348-7706, or by email, kinney@apr.ua.edu. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a research participant, contact Ms. Tanta Myles, the Research Compliance Officer, at (205) 348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. If you have complaints or concerns about this study, file them through the UA IRB outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.htm. Also, if you participate, you are encouraged to complete the short Survey for Research Participants online at this website. This helps UA improve its protection of human research participants.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS COMPLETELY VOLUNTARY. You are free not to participate or stop participating any time before you submit your answers. There is no penalty for refusing to participate, and you can stop at any time without penalty.

If you understand the statements above, are at least 18 years old, and freely consent to be in this study, click on the (I AGREE) button to begin.

UA IRB Approved Document

Approval date: 2-22-17

Expiration date: 2-21-18

Proposed Debriefing Statement.

Thank you for participating in this research. You may recall that the informed consent form indicated that I am investigating how college students respond to statements issued by nonprofit organizations following a crisis event.

To conduct this research, I needed to invent crisis situations for real nonprofit organizations. While the organization described in the press release is a real organization, the crisis you read about did not occur. I wrote the press release. I will compare the responses from this press release to other press releases describing different events and different organizations.

I am comparing how different public relations reports from organizations in crisis impact how people feel about the organization. I needed you to think this crisis was real. This allowed me to see your real responses to a crisis impacting a real organization.

Remember, your name and any other identifying information are not connected to your responses. Your responses will not be reported to your parents or any UA officials. The data will be collapsed into numerical tables for reporting purposes. No names or other identifiers will be used in the report.

It is very important that you not discuss this research with fellow students. I need to see their honest responses. Please don't discuss how you responded. I am recruiting other research subjects, so please don't disclose the real research objective to other students.

If your instructor is offering extra credit, your participation will be recorded so you can receive credit. Your instructor will not see your responses.

Now that you know the true nature of this research, do you still wish to have your responses included? If yes, continue with the submission process. If no, you can exit the research at this point. Your participation will still be reported to your instructor.

If you have any questions or concerns about any aspect of this research, please contact the research director, Dr. Lance Kinney, associate professor, advertising and public relations, University of Alabama, (205) 348-7706, Kinney@apr.ua.edu.

If you have questions or complaints about your rights as a research participant, call Ms. Tanta Myles, University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer, 205-348-8461.

Thank you for your participation.

UA IRB Approved Document
Approval date: 2-22-17
Expiration date: 2-21-18