

# The Structuration of Crisis Management: Guiding a Process of Repair

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## ABSTRACT

Crisis management, specifically the communicative response to a threatening event, is intended to both inform and persuade. However, the approaches to crisis management may be contradictory at times, constraining the intended purpose of repairing a corporation's image. Structuration theory provides a perspective for the enabling and constraining features of action as well as the unintended consequences that occur. Through a rhetorical criticism of press releases issued by BP in response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, the enabling and constraining features of crisis management are presented and a call to revisit best practices in crisis management is made.

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**A**n organization must respond to its stakeholders or to the general public when affected by a crisis, which is potentially threatening and harmful to the organization. Crisis management, a public relations strategy, is this communicative response. Crises pose a rhetorical problem, which is the need to close a gap of perceptions between what the organization knows and what members affected by the crisis know (Coombs, 2009). As a result, the crisis management response from the organization is intended to both inform and persuade (Coombs, 2009). However, the approaches to crisis management may be contradictory. For example, an approach of silence intended as a sign of grievance and respect could instead be interpreted as a form of avoidance.

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It is important to advance our understanding of processes of repair, especially in a time of crisis, so that these communicative processes can be reproduced with beneficial outcomes for the organization and publics the processes intend to serve. Previous research on crisis management has approached the examination of communicative strategies as a process of repair (Harlow, Brantley & Harlow, 2011) and has suggested best practices for crisis communication (Seeger, 2006). However, assuming that an image is repaired or that communication can adhere to best practices during a time of crisis may be too simplistic. Structuration theory states that the rules or structures that guide action are the same rules that constrain action (Giddens, 1984). Therefore, a structuration perspective would suggest that the language and rhetoric of crisis management strategies could both enable and constrain repair to an organization's image.

The purpose of this rhetorical criticism is to understand the enabling and constraining features of crisis management processes of repair. There are limited studies that have applied structuration theory to the study of public relations in general (e.g., Durham, 2005; Falkheimer, 2007) and crisis management specifically. Therefore, the current study, in addition to understanding the enabling and constraining features of processes repair, extends our understanding of structuration theory. Under the structuration perspective, this study examined the press releases in response to the British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil spill. The oil spill is an example of a crisis that affected members of the BP organization, the organization's shareholders, residents of New Orleans, and other publics throughout the nation as well as internationally. The artifacts for criticism were BP's press releases, released from April 20 to June 15, 2010, which were published on the organization's website. The strategies of crisis communication depicted the corporation taking action with a military-like approach. Actions were taken by BP executives including the CEO and included these executives making apologetic statements and launching an attack on the oil spill. These strategies are discussed as enabling to the processes of crisis management and repair as well as constraining intended repair.

# Literature Review

## *Crisis Communication*

A crisis is “a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and that threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization’s high-priority goals” (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998, p. 233). Crises take many forms and are inherently dynamic and unpredictable (Seeger, 2006). Crises are defined by high levels of uncertainty and unanticipated occurrences, severe threat to goals and values, and short or restricted time for response (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003). As a result of experiencing a crisis, there is a need for communication.

Public relations professionals are the individuals often called upon to represent the needs of a specific organization during the time of a crisis (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). These individuals attempt to control the terms, or strategies, used to describe corporate actions (Martinelli & Briggs, 1998) by disseminating information to the public, informing the public on what is happening, how it happened, what actions are being taken and what the public should do (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). Cozier and Witmer (2003) suggested that all members of an organization take part in public relations practices (as cited in Falkheimer, 2007). The personnel dedicated to addressing the crisis with communication and forming a relationship with the media to disseminate information are viewed as a resource of crisis management (Miller & Horsley, 2009).

Communication is fundamental to managing the effects of a crisis. Communication is the processes an organization takes to help reconstitute a system after it experiences a crisis (Seeger & Padgett, 2010). The functions of communication during and after a crisis include 1) clarifying risk and encouraging preparedness; 2) announcing evacuations and issuing warnings; 3) providing information to the general public; 4) enhancing coordination, cooperation and logistics among response agencies; 5) facilitating mitigation on the part of the public and affected communities; 6) helping make sense of the disaster; 7) reassuring, comforting and consoling those affected; 8) recreating order and meaning; 9) providing general information to the larger public; and 10) facilitating renewal, learning and disseminating lessons (Seeger & Padgett, 2010, p. 128). Due to the dynamic nature of a crisis and the variety of goals of crisis management, complexity and conflict ensue (Seeger, 2006). As a further result, the intention to manage negative perceptions as an effect of the crisis may re-

sult in unintended consequences.

Crisis communication occurs in stages and can be dependent upon several contingent factors (Cho & Cameron, 2010; Wilcox & Cameron, 2012). Contingency theory identifies the internal and external threats or factors that influence a crisis, and suggests that an organization must respond to a crisis in different ways depending upon the factors of each independent event (Wilcox & Cameron, 2009). The stance an organization takes in response to a crisis can range from pure advocacy to full accommodation, which, respectively, results in denial or making excuses for an event to providing a full apology for the event. This range of response can be thought of as a contingency continuum (Cho & Cameron, 2010). For example, an entertainment organization spread nude photos of a Korean celebrity via the Internet that resembled Korean comfort women, which the general public found disturbing. Throughout various stages of crisis communication, the entertainment organization went from accommodation to advocacy, ending back on accommodation by making a full apology.

Crisis communication has been examined as a symbolic approach to protecting an organization's image. According to Coombs (1998), crisis communication strategies are the symbolic resources that crisis managers use to protect and repair an organization's image. The symbolic approach to crisis management incorporates impression management strategies (Allen & Cailloet, 1994), account giving strategies (Benoit, 1995) and rhetoric (Ice, 1991). The foundations of the symbolic approach are based in rhetoric and the discipline of apologetics. Apologia is the use of communication to defend an image from public attack (Ware & Linkugel, 1973). When confronted with a threat or crisis, it is important to consider that internal members of the organization, stakeholders to the organization, and various publics perceive the image of an organization. Corporate apologia in crisis communication attempts to bridge consistency between organizational values and stakeholder values and expectations (Hearit, 1994).

The strategies of the communicative response to a crisis are intended to help minimize harm to the organization, which may include legal harm or damage to the organization's image (Heath, 2006). Image restoration theory, also referred to as image repair theory, examines the use of communication to maintain a positive image (Benoit, 1995). Benoit's five strategies of image restoration include denial, evading responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the event, corrective action and mortification. These five strategies are comprised of fourteen categories. Denial, the first of five strategies, includes simply refuting involvement with the event or crisis and shifting the blame of

the event to someone or some other organization. Second, organizations can evade responsibility for the crisis by indicating they were provoked by something or someone else's actions, they lacked sufficient information over the event, that the event was accidental, or that their organization and its members meant well. Reducing offensiveness, the third strategy, may be accomplished by several supporting strategies starting with bolstering. Bolstering reminds the public of the organization's good qualities, minimizing offensiveness indicates little damage was done, differentiation compares the current event to similar ones, transcendence places the act or event into a different context, attacking an accuser challenges those indicating a crisis exists, and compensation offers money to those affected. Corrective action, the fourth strategy, restores the situation and promises to change and prevent repeat occurrences of the event. The fifth and final strategy, mortification, involves asking for forgiveness, admitting guilt and expressing regret. Benoit's strategies remain the most comprehensive to understanding post-crisis communication, based upon the assumptions that an image holds value for an organization and that communication can help repair this image (Seeger & Padgett, 2010).<sup>1</sup>

Strategies of crisis communication share a relationship with time, which relate to the stages of a crisis and stages of repair. Strategies of image repair change over time as a crisis passes through stages (Jaques, 2007). The stages of crisis management include pre-crisis or the planning and preparation stage, the crisis stage or the immediate need to address the crisis, and post-crisis stage in which the crisis can be reevaluated and learning takes place (Coombs, 2007). Crisis communication as rhetoric focuses on the communicative response during crisis and post-crisis stages (Coombs, 2009). The response to a crisis is deliberative and forward-thinking but by looking to the past (Johnson & Sellnow, 1995).

A crisis poses a rhetorical challenge for an organization (Coombs, 2009). Rhetoric is the performance of humans using symbols to communicate with one another (Foss, 1996) in an effort to induce cooperation (Brock, Scott & Chesebro, 1990). When crisis strikes, an organization and its members must respond in an effort to manage the outcomes of the potentially threatening event by communicating with its stakeholders and various publics. The communicative response to a crisis is intended to manage the perceptions that others hold of the conflict and of the organization affected by the crisis and, when possible, the key publics of the organization (Wilcox, Cameron, Reber & Shin, 2011). The challenge becomes how that communicative response enables (as well as unintentionally constrains) the organization to repair the perceptions

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1. See Table 1

others have in a manner that is both intended and beneficial to the organization and, ideally, the publics they serve. Structuration theory provides the perspective for understanding these enabling and constraining features.

**Table 1:** Rhetorical strategies for reducing offensiveness (Benoit, 1995; Seeger & Padgett, 2010)

Strategy	Supporting Strategies	Decision
Denial		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shifting blame to external members</li> <li>• Refuting responsibility</li> </ul>
Evading responsibility		Providing excuses such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being provoked</li> <li>• Lacking sufficient information</li> <li>• Experiencing an accident</li> <li>• Having good intentions</li> </ul>
Reducing offensiveness		
	Bolstering	Projecting positive information to strengthen positive feelings toward the organization
	Minimizing offensiveness	Indicating that little damage occurred
	Differentiation	Distinguishing the event from similar, but less desirable, events
	Transcendence	Suggesting a frame of reference for the event
	Attacking	Attacking an accuser to challenge the existence of the event as undesirable
	Compensation	Offering money to those affected
Corrective action		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restoring the event or situation to the state preceding the event</li> <li>• Changing behaviour</li> <li>• Preventing the reoccurrence of the undesirable event</li> </ul>
Mortification		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting responsibility for the event</li> <li>• Asking for forgiveness</li> </ul>

## *Structuration theory*

Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration encompasses issues surrounding the nature of human action, how action and interaction should be conceptualized as it relates to institutions, and how to approach the practical connotations of social analysis. Structuration theory is concerned with dualities, including the duality between agent and structure (Giddens, 1984). The human agent, with agency to act, is both enabled and constrained by the rules and resources or the structure of her environment. Agency is also afforded to nonhuman entities such as signs and symbols, which provide direction or are intended to elicit a response. The outcome of agency or action is the production and reproduction of structure. An agent creates the environment in which she acts and the structures of that environment recreate her.

Human agents are knowledgeable and conscious of their environment affording them agency to act. If asked, an agent could articulate her action and reasons for action (Giddens, 1984). Yet with agency to act, an agent is constrained by the same environment. Durham (2005) proposed that public relations practitioners are presented with both an opportunity (enabled to act) and the threat (constraint) to act when presented with a conflict. In describing public relations, a structuration perspective acknowledges the dynamic and transforming nature of the field (Falkheimer, 2007), which provides insight into the enabling and constraining features therein.

The relationship or duality between agency and structure is fundamental to understanding action and outcomes. Structures serve as both "medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize" (Giddens, 1984, p. 25). The action an agent takes, both enabled and constrained by structure (medium), leads to the production and reproduction of the same structures (outcome) over time. Using relationships as an example, the relationships that develop among members of an organization (outcome) could facilitate (medium) future change, depicted as a balance of power within those same relationships (Garner, 2006). The rules of language can also be understood as both medium and outcome. In the study of organizational identification, the rules of language acted as a resource to developing an organizational identity that, when modified, produce a new basis for interaction among organization members (Scott, Corman & Cheney, 1998). On one hand, language may enable opportunities for interaction among organizational members and, on the other hand, may constrain future dialogue that does not fit into the modified language structures produced.

Agency, or the ability to act with intention, is assigned to nonhuman agents as well as human agents. According to Cooren, Taylor and VanEvery (2006), a nonhuman entity, such as a sign can tell you to “stop,” and therefore has agency. This does not discredit the human agent behind the creation of the sign. Instead, it extends our understanding of agency by depicting the relationship that a text or object has in guiding action and outcome.

Understanding agency has implications for facilitating communicative acts (medium) and communication outcomes. For “all outcomes must be interpreted as they are produced” (Durham, 2005, p. 32). Agency awards the agent with an ability to act differently in a given situation (Giddens, 1984) further complicating the outcomes and interpretation of those outcomes. Based upon these assumptions, communication as an outcome is the representation of intended action.

## *Rhetoric*

Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory provides a unique perspective for understanding the outcomes, or communicative responses to a crisis. Crises have been examined by the governing processes of public relations practices (e.g. apologia and image repair), which are essentially the structures that enable and constrain the communicative response to crisis. More broadly put, the structural elements of an organization are both constituted by rhetoric and serve as a rhetorical function (Charland, 1987). The rhetoric or crisis communication strategies serve as both outcome and medium to change. Giddens suggests that agents reflexively monitor the flow of their social life and can account for the reasons behind their actions in language. Examining the language of crisis communication, therefore, provides a perspective on the agents and agency behind the creation of these communicative strategies as well as how these strategies work to both enable and constrain the processes of repair.

Rhetoric suggests that language can be both action and object. Rhetoric is the object that influences how social meaning is created (Brummett, 1976). Rhetoric is considered instrumental and purposeful (Brock, Scott & Chesebro, 1980). The signs and symbols of rhetoric are the irreducible elements of language (Bruyn, 1966). Bruyn (1966) defines signs and symbols as follows. A sign is any individual’s expression to another individual that communicates a message in a particular situation. A symbol is anything that stands for anything else. A metaphor is an implied comparison between things essentially unlike one another. It is a device for seeing one thing in the terms of another.

Analogies are metaphors made explicit by “like” or “as.” Irony is seen as the depiction of human action and the consequences of this action, which are opposite to what was intended by the human or action. A paradox is hard to distinguish from irony. It is an apparent contradiction between two equally valid ideas or principles, which is nevertheless found to be true. Metonymy is the substitution of the name of one thing for the name of another thing, e.g., BP has just announced...where BP represents one individual within the company. Similar to metonymy is synecdoche, which is a figure of speech in which we use the part for the whole.

As action, rhetoric is the creation and application of symbols to communicate with one another and to generate an intended response from another (Foss, 1996). In an organizational setting, communication and symbols can be used to convey culture as well as act as mechanisms for control. Rosen (1985) observed the symbols advertising practitioners used at an annual breakfast to convey shared values of the organization’s culture. Symbols at the event included food served, attire worn, speeches given and awards presented and were used for the manipulation and reproduction of bureaucratic forms (Rosen, 1985). Brock, Scott and Chesebro defined rhetoric as “the human effort to induce cooperation through the use of symbols” (p. 14, 1980).

Rhetoric and its symbols work to create and shape perspectives that are shared for both cooperation and competition as well as to inform and enact choices (Heath, 2009). In crisis management, the symbols used to convey meaning are also intended to repair the image of an organization affected by an event. Furthermore, “the role of rhetoric enters where there is difference of opinion, doubt, uncertainty, and even firmly held opinions which may be wrong” (Heath, 2009, p. 22). If there were no differences in opinion and no need for negotiating meaning, there would be no need for rhetoric (Heath, 2009).

A crisis necessitates the negotiation of meaning between an organization and its public(s). Crisis communication as a process of repair is both intentional and performed, which also requires interpretation. How this process is simultaneously enabling and constraining to repairing an organization’s image has yet to be examined within the literature. Therefore, the research questions are:

**RQ1:** How does the rhetoric of crisis communication enable processes of repair?

**RQ2:** How does the same rhetoric constrain crisis management processes of repair?

## Method

The method was a rhetorical criticism. As stated earlier, rhetoric is the action humans perform by applying symbols with the purpose of communicating with others (Foss, 1996). Rhetorical criticism is the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artifacts, for the purposes of understanding rhetorical processes and how they operate (Foss, 1996). Rhetorical criticism considers the strategies of text to frame meaning, to create understanding, and, as a result of bridging a connection between text and audience, to facilitate cooperative action (Livesey, 2002). The artifacts were selected and research questions asked simultaneously. One critic analyzed the artifacts. The artifact, units of analysis and process of analysis are discussed further below.

## Artifact

The artifacts for analysis were press releases released by BP on its corporate website in response to the Deepwater Horizon explosion and subsequent oil spill. The crisis occurred on April 20, 2010. Previous studies have utilized the news coverage and press releases surrounding an organizational crisis to examine communication strategies (Durham, 2005; Harlow et al., 2010). The selection of artifacts available through a given medium at a given point in time, and are appropriate to the study's purpose, is considered an availability-based procedure (Neuendorf, 2002). Therefore, for the purposes of the current study, press releases posted on BP's corporate website were collected as an availability-based procedure.

The time frame for analysis began on April 20, 2010, which was the start of the crisis, and ended on June 15, 2010, which is the date President Obama addressed the nation and demanded that BP take action to resolve the crisis. The time frame is in accord with that of previous research (Harlow, et al., 2010). A total of 60 press releases were issued within that time frame and obtained from the organization's official website. One press release was a quarterly financial statement and, therefore, was excluded from analysis. The final population of artifacts included 59 press releases totaling 60 pages of single-spaced text (with .5 inch margins).

## Analysis

The critic took a receiver-centered perspective and considered the potential interpretations that the artifact and its rhetoric would have on audiences (Engstrom, 2010). Multiple units of analysis were analyzed including word selections, metaphors, other symbols such as metonymy and synecdoche, and arguments as they related to enabling or constraining image repair. These symbols are identified in the findings by quotation marks.

An initial screening of artifacts consisted of a line-by-line reading of each press release to identify and highlight words, metaphors, etc. During this process notes were made regarding the overall arguments and strategies that these word choices may be collectively representing. After the first reading and note taking, the artifacts were read again with attention given to the highlighted units. During subsequent readings thereafter, highlighted units were assigned to categories by likeness, for example, metaphors such as "incident," "situation," "event" and "accident" were categorized as descriptors for "crisis." When saturation of interpretation was reached, and the critic reached a thorough familiarity with the units of analysis, findings were summarized. These findings are presented below.

### *The Crisis Response*

The crisis of the Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil spill demanded a response. When the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig caught fire and had to be evacuated, BP issued the first of many press releases in which the corporation "offered its full support" to their licensee and drilling contractor, Transocean Ltd. This support came in the first of many communicative responses starting with the first press release on April 20. In this response BP indicated that it was "very focused on providing every possible assistance in the effort to deal with the consequences of the incident."

On April 22, BP began to share the details of the corporation's plan to respond to and activate containment of, and repair due to, the spilled oil. On April 25, BP continued to assist Transocean, but also started its "attack." Efforts of the "attack" included drilling a relief well, bringing in vessels and other resources to collect and store the oil, using dispersant to break up the oil, releasing boom to contain the oil, and taking additional efforts to protect the shoreline.

On April 30, according to BP Group Chief Executive Tony Hayward, BP was taking “full responsibility for the spill.” During the next month and half, BP continued its response in the Gulf of Mexico with a commitment to “understand[ing] the causes...to try to ensure that nothing like it ever happens again,” and to offering local residents, businesses, neighbouring states, and other stakeholders information, updates via the web, as well as making monetary payments. By taking full responsibility, BP showed a commitment to its response and the resources that would support this response. The response also made explicit mention of the cooperation with state and federal governments, as well as with nongovernment organizations, and their respective efforts. The implication was that BP was taking initiatives because they were mandated by government agencies and organizations.

The response to the crisis included action and plans for action that encompassed drilling a relief well, stopping the spill of oil, collecting and containing oil, preventing oil from reaching the shoreline and cleaning up oil that spilled into the sea and reached the shore. Various symbols were used interchangeably to describe the nature of the oil spill and its effects. Throughout the press releases, the “crisis” and “oil spill” were also referred to as an “incident,” a “tragic accident,” an “event” and a “situation.” The effects of the “situation” included an “environmental impact” and “loss of oil.” As a result of the “situation” and “impact,” “costs” were incurred and claims paid, “cleaning efforts” needed, and “full resources” were mobilized. These metaphors were alternate ways to describe the oil spill as a crisis, the effects of the crisis and responses to the crisis. Further analysis of these symbols, in response to the research questions, is provided below.

### *Enabling and Constraining Crisis Communication*

The strategies of crisis communication, first and foremost, depicted the action taken by BP. The action was symbolized by a metaphorical plan of attack, which was enacted and supported by BP agents and their affiliate agents among other resources such as time and money. Symbols were used consistently but, in doing so, inconsistencies in the plan of attack were made apparent. These strategies are discussed as enabling to the processes of repair (RQ1) as well as constraining (RQ2). For example, by referring to the crisis as a “situation” opposed to a “crisis,” BP was able to alleviate the intensity of a crisis, therefore, enabling reassurance. However, referring to a crisis as a “situation” simultaneously reduced the serious nature of the event thus constraining BP’s

self-proclaimed responsibility. These strategies are elaborated upon below and supported by exemplar quotes from the press releases.

### *Planning an Attack*

Metaphors used to describe BP's activity in response to the oil spill, such as a "response" and to "activate" a plan, when used individually, were descriptive. But when used collectively and over time, they depicted a military strategy to "deal with the consequences of the incident." For example, "capture" was a description for the collection of oil. In addition to capturing oil, the "response" was to "attack" the spill, "mobilize" and "deploy" vessels to "protect the shoreline." Overall, the symbols of action represented a plan of attack comparable to a strategy for war.

Contradictions in the military strategy emerged. "Attacking [the] spill" was BP's "action plan." However, this plan was indicated to be "safety-focused." In response to a crisis, and as BP indicated in response to this specific crisis, it was important to act safely. The crisis threatened the safety of both workers and the environment. The unintended consequence of "attacking," "using a top-kill" operation, and "fight[ing]" the oil spill was communicating a less than safe action plan.

### *Agency to Respond*

The symbols used in BP's public response depicted action and agency to act in several ways. Agency to act was represented by quotes from BP's corporate members (8) and members from other affiliated organizations (8). Direct quotes were those of Tony Hayward, BP Group Chief Executive; Steve Benz, President and CEO of Marine Spill Response Corporation; experts of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; a BP company spokesperson; Christopher D'Elia, professor and Dean at Louisiana State University; Carl-Henric Svanberg, BP Chairman; Doug Suttles, Chief Operating Officer, BP Exploration and Production; Bob Dudley, BP Managing Director; Christof Ruehl, BP Chief Economist; Ian Conn, BP Group Managing Director and Chief Executive of Refining & Marketing; Haley Barbour, Mississippi Governor; Darryl Willis, Head of BP's Claims Team; Doris Carver, Louisiana State University Interim Vice Chancellor; Frank T. Brogan, Chancellor of the State University System of Florida; William Hogarth, acting Director of Florida Institute

University System of Florida; William Hogarth, acting Director of Florida Institute of Oceanography; David Shaw, Mississippi State's Vice President for Research and Economic Development (by date and order of appearance within each release).

Synecdoche, or using the part for a whole, enabled the authority of BP's actions. For example, using Hayward as the human spokesperson, BP indicated how the corporation felt in response to the "tragic incident." Through his voice, a top-level authority figure was able to depict the repair strategy of reassuring, comforting and consoling those affected by stating, "We owe a lot to everyone who works on offshore facilities around the world and no words can express the sorrow and pain when such a tragic incident happens" (April 24, 2010). "On behalf of all" members of BP, Hayward offered his "deepest sympathies...to the families and friends who have suffered such a terrible loss" and thoughts were sent to "their colleagues, especially those who are recovering from their injuries."

Quotes attributed to Hayward proceeded to address how the corporation would act in response to the crisis, which remained consistent over time. The "top priority" for BP was to address how "we can tackle this spill" with "our action plan," and to do "absolutely everything in our power to eliminate the source of the leak and contain the environmental impact of the spill." While attributed to a titled member of the organization, the quotes depicted the collective human side of the corporation by using words such as "we" and "our." These quotes, therefore, attributed agency to act to the corporations' members collectively.

Action was indicated both explicitly and implicitly. Stating how "we" the corporation will "tackle" the oil and "eliminate" the source of the leak provided explicate details to the action taken by BP directly. BP also stated how the corporation would work in agreement with other agencies, including the federal government, creating ambiguity on who was initiating action. For example, BP "agree[s]" to work with and "look[s] forward" to hearing recommendations from the U.S. president. However, the motives beyond these actions and reactions in response to the crisis were not explicitly stated. Instead, woven into the response was ambiguity and it was implied that the government was mandating BP to take specific actions. For example, Hayward, on behalf of BP states,

We absolutely understand and share President Obama's sense of urgency... Wcy... We want to thank the President and his administration for their ongoing engagement in this effort... we are participating fully in investigations that will provide valuable lessons about how to prevent future inci-

dents of this nature. (May 14, 2010)

It remains unclear whether participation in the investigation was mandated by the government or initiated by BP and what, exactly, "participat[ion]" involved. Additional examples illuminate this ambiguity.

Following the corporation's agreement to "fully" participate in "investigations," BP engaged in other coordinated efforts. One example is the grants awarded by BP to the states of Florida, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. The grants were provided to "mitigate the economic impact of the oil spill" on the states' tourism industries. Hayward acknowledged that BP "understand[s] the Governors' concerns" for the impact on the tourism industry. By agreeing to participate and understanding government concerns, BP appears to comprehend the full responsibility it previously ascribed to taking. However, the agreement of "understanding" implies the involvement of other parties and, therefore, it remains unclear as to which party is taking the first step toward responsibility and action. While the strategy enables BP to take charge and correct the action, by not explicitly stating the reasons behind these efforts, full disclosure and responsibility is constrained thus causing confusion.

Action was also attributed to nonhuman entities, which acted as a form of metonymy by substituting the work done by humans. Statements referring to the "work" or "response" indicated that the entity of "work" was acting opposed to a human agent. For example, "Work is also continuing to produce a subsea collection system capable of operating in deep water to funnel leaking oil to the surface for treatment." In another statement, "operations to skim oil from the surface of the water also continued." These responses describe the efforts as those of "work" and "operations" taking action opposed to BP corporate members in charge of overseeing the work and operations. Efforts described as "work" and "operations" opposed to BP corporate members in charge of overseeing the work and operations were both enabling and constraining to processes of repair. On one hand, this language enabled a bigger picture of the efforts behind the response. However, on the other hand, this language constrained the attribution of full responsibility to the corporation and its members.

The natural resources of weather also had a part in action, working independently and in tandem with manmade tactics. It was noted that weather had an influence on the enactment of the plan and "response." Weather was "enabling" action thus depicting agency to act from a nonhuman entity. And when weather "improved," "confidence" to "tackle the spill" increased. Improved weather worked in tandem with other tactics:

Improved weather for vessels and aircraft is aiding in the dispersion of the sheen that comprises the vast majority of the spill and is enabling skimming vessels to operate far offshore and aircraft to fly multiple dispersant sorties. Weathering and dispersion tactics are breaking down the oil into a frothy emulsion. (April 29, 2010)

Weather, as a nonhuman agent, depicted the uncertainty of events that had an influence on other, both human and nonhuman, agents' ability to act and respond to the crisis. In addition to weather, new technology made uncertainty possible. For example, new techniques "being attempted or evaluated to contain the flow of oil on the seabed involve significant uncertainties because they have not been tested in these conditions before." Applying agency to weather and other uncertainties such as technology enabled the flexibility to respond.

## *Consistency*

On May 6, the following statement started to appear consistently within press releases: "Work continues to collect and disperse oil that has reached the surface of the sea and to protect the shoreline." The metonymy of "work" completing tasks of collection and protection remained consistent, while variations to the statement included the expansion of what "work" involved. By the second appearance of this statement, "work" had been supplemented by the number of vessels, such as skimmers and barges, the number of flights over the spill, and the length of boom available and on order. By the third appearance of this statement, the monetary costs of the "response" were included, which addressed the costs of oil containment, relief well drilling and monetary settlements. By the fourth appearance of this statement, the number of personnel working for BP and government agencies, who were involved with the response efforts, was included.

The repeated use of the aforementioned and other strategies enabled a consistent format for interpretation of information. Consistency, such as with the metonymy of "work," enabled the identification and comprehension of information made available. However, consistency also made inconsistency noticeable. For example, the number of allocated resources was inconsistent. Inconsistency mostly related to an increase in resources over time, say from 80,000 feet of boom on May 6 to 1 million feet of boom on May 10. The number of resources increasing over time enabled readers to understand the magnitude of the "response." However, reported numbers were not always accurate.

For example on May 7, 30,000 individuals had volunteered. On May 13, the number of volunteers was 16,000. Therefore, either the first or second reference to the number of volunteers working on the "response" was inaccurate.

Other communication strategies drew attention to inconsistency. For example, the metaphors used for oil released into the Gulf and oil that reached the shoreline changed based upon its monetary value and as an environmental threat. As it pertained to revenue, the substance spilled was referred to as "oil." On June 8, it was released that, "BP today announced that it will donate the net revenue from oil recovered...to create a new wildlife fund..." Oil was collected and sold so that the net revenue could be used to make a donation to "create, restore, improve and protect wildlife habitat." However, this same substance was also referred to as "oil water" and an "oily liquid." As oil was collected from the water's surface in an effort to "prevent oil from reaching the coast," it was referred to as an "oily" and watered down substance. Referring to the substance as oily liquid reduced the severity of oil as a threat to the "shorelines of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida" in need of "major protection." The substance was more resourceful as "oil" when it was needed to generate revenue and less threatening to the environment as "oily liquid."

## Discussion

British Petroleum responded to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill with press releases intended to inform its various publics as well as persuade these publics that they, along with their various partners, were taking the appropriate actions to repair the damage caused by the spill. Along with the damage, BP's communicative response was intended to repair the organization's image. Best practices, while they describe the strategies and processes for repairing an organization's image when crisis strikes, limit our understanding of the complexity involved in crisis management. From a structuration perspective, the communicative processes of crisis management, which are intended to inform, clarify, make sense of, facilitate learning, etc., are dynamic and, therefore, simultaneously enable and constrain repair. A few examples from the current study illustrate this point.

Seeger and Padgett (2010) suggested that the function of communication during a time of crisis (and post-crisis) is to reassure, comfort and console those affected. This study found that the use of metaphors, of the oil spill as well as the effects of the oil spill, was a means to alleviate the intensity of the crisis. Therefore, metaphors enabled reassurance. However, the crisis of the

oil spill was simultaneously trivialized by the use of metaphors. Referring to a crisis as an “event” and “situation,” which populated the press releases, reduced the severity of the oil spill and the impact that this spill had on businesses and residents of the affected states.

Strategies of preparedness and coordinated action were illustrated by the use of spokespersons including BP executives and members of affiliated organizations. It has been argued that the use of spokespersons, presumably credible sources, and coordinating messages between these sources enhances the consistency of messages and reduces confusion among audiences (Seeger, 2006). The various sources used in BP press releases depicted a sense of preparedness as well as responsibility for the crisis. However, the metonymy of substituting a spokesperson on behalf of the corporation simultaneously had constraining effects. Through the use of a spokesperson, even one as authoritative as the CEO of BP, the corporate image was reduced down to one individual. Unless the importance of a corporate image resides within the value of that one individual, this process of repair is constraining to BP’s image as a powerful, established and reputable corporation comprised by tens of thousands of employees, service partners, resources, etc.

In addition to depicting the enabling and constraining features of crisis management, Durham (2005) suggested that structuration can contribute to the meaningful practice of public relations by affording awareness to power, agency to act and the unintended consequences of action. Agency was depicted, in part, by direct quotes from members of the corporation on behalf of the corporation. Various resources including time spent, monetary contributions, volunteer personnel and organizational collaborations, such as the support BP gave to the government and received from other organizations, supported action taken to repair the damage caused by the crisis. For example, on April 28, BP indicated that it would support and cooperate with the U.S. government’s investigations. The unintended consequence of acknowledging this support was depicting BP and its repair efforts as reactive versus active and, thus, diminishing accountability from the organization for the crisis and its effects.

The press releases issued by BP called attention to uncertainty due to weather. With a high level of uncertainty inherent within a crisis (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998), it might seem contradictory to call further attention to uncertainty and ambiguity. Including some level of uncertainty in a crisis management response has been called a best practice (Seeger, 2006). In the present study, weather, albeit a nonhuman entity, is afforded agency. Therefore, we might revise best practices to not only disclaim uncertainty but also in doing so provide room for movement and flexibility within the repair plan.

As previously stated, structuration theory extends upon the previous best practices of crisis management by shifting attention to agency, unintended consequences of action and the simultaneous enabling and constraining features of the symbolic processes of repair. In light of these findings, the structuration perspective suggests that we revisit best practices of crisis management. Moving forward, public relations and crisis management practitioners might challenge current practices by asking,

- 1) What action is depicted in the crisis response?
- 2) Who are the agents responsible for this action?
- 3) What influence do these agents and their representative actions have, if any, on the corporation's image?
- 4) What are the intended consequences of the response?
- 5) What is the potential for unintended consequences and how might those potential consequences affect the corporation's image?
- 6) How does the response enable reparation of the corporation's image?
- 7) How does the response simultaneously constrain reparation?

While a dialogic approach to crisis management is a suggested best practice (Seeger, 2006), the present analysis was not applicable to understanding the extent to which BP listened to the public's concerns or opened a forum for dialogue with the public. The current study was limited to one crisis and one format of communicative responses to that crisis, BP's press releases issued online. Future studies could include the public as an agent involved in the structuration of crisis management by examining the public's response to press releases, website content, etc.; the communication platforms available or created for dialogue to occur; and the dialogue between various publics and the corporation.

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