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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES, MEDIA COVERAGE AND TIME ON
CRISIS MANAGEMENT AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION
DURING MAJOR OIL SPILLS

by

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This research builds upon the scholarship in crisis communication strategies and apologia employed by companies during a crisis. Within the expansive domain of crisis management, this work evaluates the media coverage and crisis communication strategies during three major oil spills: the Exxon *Valdez*, the *American Trader*, and the BP Gulf oil spill. The purpose of this study is to provide practitioners, researchers and others additional insight into the impact of media coverage on prior, current and future crises and how this coverage, coupled with the communication strategies of companies during a crisis, can influence public awareness or perception. Furthermore, this work examines how some crises are referenced over time and can be linked with other crises and that the public awareness of a crisis through continued or sustained media and scholarly references can exist well beyond the presumed resolution of a crisis. The study reveals that crises spread to others, can be overshadowed by other crises, and can result in an echo that lasts for years.

This research expands on the work of Hearit (1994, 1995, 1999, 2006), Benoit (1995, 1997, 2004) and others by incorporating public statements by CEOs and executives into a holistic evaluation of the communication strategies present during crises. Specifically, this work contends that unscripted or spontaneous comments made by top executives often contradict or undermine prepared, planned crisis communication strategies implemented by a company during

a crisis and can influence media coverage, narratives of the event, and public perception. As such, additional categories were identified to encapsulate the expanded variations of rhetoric and strategies often displayed during a crisis. I conclude that scholars and practitioners need to continue to expand the crisis domain through the use of interdisciplinary evaluation approaches with a continued emphasis and focus on the importance communication plays in the perceived success or failure of a company's management of a crisis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Background: The Domain of Crisis Management

Crisis management, as a formal practice and area of academic inquiry, largely arose from the aftermath of the Tylenol-Cyanide Poisoning Crisis of 1982 (Mitroff, 2001; Simola, 2005). The management and handling of cyanide-laced capsules by Johnson & Johnson, the maker of the popular anti-inflammatory medicine resulted in more serious research of crisis phenomena and produced lessons and methods for practitioners to learn and understand how to manage future crises. Johnson & Johnson's effective management of the crisis was roundly lauded and became not only a benchmark for practitioners but also a model of inquiry in academia that resulted in the emergence of a new interdisciplinary paradigm. Important work that was particularly prevalent in public relations, communication, management and organizational theory developed soon after the crisis subsided. Since the Tylenol crisis, scholars from many disciplines have contributed to the multifaceted domain generally referred to as crisis management (Fink, 1986; Mitroff, Alpaslan & Green, 2004; Piotrowski, et al., 2010). Out of need, interest and necessity due to the variance and complexity of crisis occurrences, crisis management is now found across various fields and disciplines with many scholars contributing through their disciplinary lenses and others who have taken a more holistic approach.

The crisis, disaster, and emergency planning literatures have long existed and can be characterized generally as theoretical, empirical, and practitioner-oriented articles (Fowler, et al., 2007). Increases in societal complexities along with the increase in the frequencies and variations of what constitutes a crisis has created an imperative for research that can assist governments, organizations and decision-makers to focus on preparation and planning for the likelihood that a crisis event will occur. History is plentiful with examples of major disasters and

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crises accompanied by failed regulation, ignored warnings, inept disaster response, and commonplace human error (Perrow, 2011). Communication plays an integral role in the perceived success or failure of an organization's response to a crisis and seems to magnify the negative impact of a crisis on an organization in many instances. Prominent examples and case studies continue to demonstrate organizational failings to adequately plan for crises and to have the necessary resources allocated to deal with what outsiders perceive is an anomalistic event. In addition, leaders in many organizations demonstrate inept ability at communicating effectively with the various stakeholders impacted by the crisis. Communication failures compound the perceived injury caused by the crisis itself and undermines any measure of effectiveness of managing a crisis. As such, communication is a critical function of crisis management (Haddow & Haddow, 2014) and greatly influences the public's perception of whether or not a company's amelioration and image repair efforts were successful.

Crisis events disrupt normal operations and have the potential for severe, negative impacts on individuals, organizations and society. Communities, organizations and leaders are perceived to have failed to minimize losses and lessen the effects of a crisis competently face significant consequences. These consequences, such as resulting in loss of life, damage to reputation, challenges to economic viability and other impacts are exacerbated if an organization or corporation is seen to have inadequately prepared for or responded to crisis events. As society becomes increasingly complex, globalized and interdependent, crisis events will become more frequent and impact more organizations and people. Therefore, the need to expand our understanding of crises and organizational responses to crisis events is of paramount importance. Why an organization appears to be unprepared or respond adequately to a crisis event given the expanding body of academic work, the growth of professional crisis experts and highly-

publicized crises warrants continued examination. Particularly interesting and perplexing to scholars and practitioners should be why some organizations appear to fail to adequately respond to a crisis similar in nature and characteristics to a prior crisis that is well-documented and researched in the chronicles of crisis lore. Furthermore, repeating mistakes similar to those others committed during their respective crisis is both puzzling and fascinating given the potential costs and impact a crisis can inflict.

Problem Statement

Crises are an inevitable part of modern society (Fearn-Banks, 1996; Fink, 1986; Hargis & Watt, 2010). The term 'crisis' has many connotations for individuals and organizations alike and many definitions of what constitute a crisis in the literature. Smith and Elliot (2006) suggest that the term "crisis" is one of the "most misused words within modern society" and ambiguity surrounds the core processes that underpin the construct (p.1). Fearn-Banks (1996) defines an organizational crisis as "a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting an organization as well as its publics, services, products, and/or good name (p. 480). Carroll (1989) suggests a crisis is an emotionally charged event that can be a turning point for better or worse. Ulmer et al. (2007) defines crisis as a "specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threaten or are perceived to threaten an organization's high-priority goals" (p.7). Relatedly, crisis management (CM) is a systematic attempt by an organization, in conjunction with external stakeholders, to avert crises or effectively manage them when they occur (Pearson & Clair, 1998). An organizational crisis can cause loss of life, injuries, financial loss, damage to reputation, and harm stakeholders. With the consequences that accompany a major crisis and the impacts on society and the organization or organizations involved, the ability of a company to communicate effectively is of

paramount importance to all involved. However, far too many examples exist where companies with a history of prior crises or in an industry prone to similar crises have failed in their communication efforts, further damaging the company's reputation. Exxon's 1989 response to the *Valdez* disaster is seen as planning, response and rhetorical failures. BP's 2010 Gulf oil crisis is a leading example of how a corporation's public relations team attempts to implement various image repair or apologia strategies only to have these efforts contradicted and undermined by its top executives.

The interdependency and interconnectedness of modern society suggest that the likelihood of a crisis striking an organization is more likely than not. This means that a crisis may not necessarily arise from within an organization in order for that organization to become engulfed in one. Similarly, as society, communities, and organizations become more complex, the various societal systems have more interwoven components that increase the probability a crisis can and will emerge. Crises and disasters are prevalent and increasing in frequency (Kessler & Wittchen, 2008). Prominent examples and case studies continue to demonstrate organizational inadequacies in crises planning and response. These shortcomings are demonstrated in their reactions and are often apparent in the communicative behavior of CEOs and other executives. Crises highlight organizational weakness but also offer opportunities for that organization and other organizations to learn from their experience and the experiences of others. This is particularly true when organizations occupy and operate in similar conditions or with similar functions. The challenge or problem identified through current research is that although each crisis is unique in certain ways, each seems to demonstrate multiple shortcomings as well as an unwillingness or lack of capacity to learn from the previous crises of others. With the increased likelihood that organizations will experience a crisis and the amplification of a

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population affected, understanding organizational failures in crisis planning, response and mitigation is of paramount importance with vital lessons for others to learn when facing a crisis of their own.

Crisis Management Plans (CMP)

Organizations that have experienced a crisis are more likely to institute crisis management planning and sense they are more prepared for future crises. (Hutchins, Annulis, & Gaudet, 2008; Spillan & Hough, 2008). The literature seems to have a consistent trend: organizations feel better prepared after experiencing a crisis yet seem overconfident in either their ability to manage any crisis or in denial regarding the likelihood on will engulf their organization. While policy development through the acquisition of knowledge by experience produces aspects of organizational learning (Elliott, 2006; Elliott & Smith, 2008) a lack of integration from policy to practice has been identified as a key barrier of organizational preparedness for crisis management (Elliott, 2009; Pearson & Clair, 1998). New organizational policies that arise from past crisis experience, while providing evidentiary identifications of awareness, do not necessarily translate into actual organizational learning nor do they ensure that future mistakes or repeated mistakes during a crisis are evitable (Birkland, 1996; Elliott, 2009).

The passage of time from crisis to crisis impacting the same organization needs further exploration in research to examine whether internal lessons learned from past experiences transcends changes in leadership and organizational growth. Even less is known as to the degree companies have prepared for crises *others* have experienced are incorporated into their own crisis planning and preparation separate from changes in regulatory policies or laws imposed on the industry or sector as result of a crisis event. What is clear is that prominent examples exist,

such as the Exxon *Valdez*, *American Trader* and BP Gulf oil spills that demonstrate the "what to do" and "what not to do" in terms of communicative and action responses during a crisis.

Organizational leaders and organizational culture suffers from the "it-can't-happen-here" syndrome that catches many organizations off guard or in a false sense of security that it can handle a crisis should one arise (Britton, 2016; Fink, 1986; McConnell & Drennan, 2006; Moed, as cited in Levick, 2005; Shrivastava, 1993; Turner & Pidgeon, 1997; Wang, 2008). This mindset is a foreboding indicator of an organization's leaders who are likely ill-equipped to deal with a major crisis event and respond effectively. This orientation of relative immunity toward future crises or at least over confidence in organizational capacity in dealing with a potential crisis is interesting in sectors where the most profound crises have occurred and have dominated the public's attention. This is particularly notable in sectors, such as the oil and gas exploration and transportation industry, where catastrophes have resulted in significant harm to the environment as well as financial losses and reputational damage (O'Connor, 2011; Sylves, 1998).

Changes in regulatory policies and government oversight functions almost always follow high-profile crises in addition to new preparation requirements imposed on all those within a particular sector. These changes not only add to the costs on the organization or organizations perceived to be responsible for the crisis and its mitigation but also expand the impact of a crisis on others. Crises not only impact the organization involved and direct stakeholders, the secondary and tertiary affects permeate through various sectors within an industry and those connected to it. Prominent crises not only have an immediate and pronounced impact, they are constant reminders of an offense committed by an organization on society. As such, it should be incumbent on organizations and ingrained into their culture and planning to prepare for potential

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crises and not repeat the mistakes of others. The rapid advances in technology have also elevated the public's awareness of a crisis through immediate diffusion and the ability for the public to react to a crisis and the organization's response. Furthermore, the media and public are now able to retrieve historical information on the company's history of prior crises and crises of a similar kind involving other organizations. Therefore, not only are companies currently enduring a crisis facing additional attention, scrutiny and reputational threats, companies involved in crises long-thought as resolved now face their own perceptional challenges by news references that relate their past experiences with present crises.

The *Deepwater Horizon*, BP Gulf oil spill

The *Deepwater Horizon* oil rig, operated by Transocean and contractor Haliburton for BP exploded on April 20, 2010. In addition to the eleven workers killed, the blowout that occurred deep under the ocean spilled nearly five million gallons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico over five months. The spill is considered the worst oil spill in U.S. history (Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, n.d., para.1) and BP received most of the blame for the incident (Harlow et al., 2011). The BP Gulf oil spill dominated the media and public attention for many months and still lingers today. BP was the dominant news story for nine weeks following the spill. Constant media attention and breaking news meant that the story never went away and BP's overestimation at resolving it along with CEO Tony Hayward's controversial comments fed the critical coverage of the disaster (Pew Research Center, 2010).

The BP Gulf oil spill also resulted in a crisis for U.S. President Barack Obama's administration with many pundits and media outlets suggesting that this spill and the inability to stop the flow of oil gushing from the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico for months as Obama's "Katrina moment" (Pew Research Center, 2010). This reference to Hurricane Katrina and the

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indelible mark it left on former President George W. Bush's disaster leadership demonstrates the dispersion of impacts to multiple stakeholders and how past-crises are used as a comparison or barometer of success or failure to those occurring presently. Consequently, criticism of the government's response and of President Obama's handling of the crisis, which amounted to the second-highest focus of the spill narrative, made matters worse for BP and Tony Hayward as the president and his officials criticized Hayward and his comments and suggested he was not suited for his position (Pew Research Center, 2010; Wray, 2010).

Prior to the BP incident, the 1989 Exxon *Valdez* oil spill off the coast of Alaska had the distinction of being named the worst oil spill (Gill et al., 2012). The Exxon *Valdez* spilled nearly eleven million gallons of crude oil into the sea in the pristine coastal waters of Prince William Sound (Botkin & Keller, 2009; Perrons, 2013). While the *Valdez* discharged more oil, the BP Gulf Oil spill impacted nearly twice the geographical coastal area and resulted in eleven deaths. In addition, the public had access to multiple sources of information along with media coverage due to the internet and prevalence of social media, technology and information dissemination not available at the time of the Exxon disaster. This, coupled with the uncertainty of how to stop a leak at such low depths on the bottom of the ocean, containment over such a wide area, extensive media exposure, number of communities and businesses affected and BP's criminal and civil exposure suggests that the Gulf oil spill will be considered by many as the worst oil disaster of all time (Robertson & Krauss, 2010).

Like its future successor, the Exxon *Valdez* spill off the coast of Alaska dominated the media coverage and public attention. And, like BP's crisis, the communication of Exxon and its executives during the crisis came under considerable scrutiny and criticism from the media, public and government officials alike. Exxon's focus during the initial stages of the crisis was

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on clean-up efforts and not necessarily implementing an effective crisis communication strategy. Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl was widely criticized for his refusal to publicly comment on the disaster and for failing to visit the scene of the incident. Rawl ignored all of the moves public relations professionals would have advised and Exxon's poor communication strategy during the *Valdez* incident resulted in significant damage to its reputation, damage that still lingers to this day (Fearn-Banks, 2011).

Prominent crises emphasize the essential role that communication plays in the perceived level of successful crisis management and can influence the impacts on the organization viewed as responsible for the crisis. The issue of image risk and image management drive the success or failure of an organization as much as a balance sheet (Nunes & Schultz, 2011). This is not to suggest that planning, mitigation efforts and quick responses are not vital to success; rather it stresses the imperative for effective communication during a crisis. Other variables appear to also influence the media scrutiny and perception of successful of an organization's handling of a crisis and their ability to communicate during one. The timing of a crisis also may contribute to the perception of an organization's crisis management ability and whether other events dominate media coverage and distract or steer public attention elsewhere.

Less than a year after the Exxon *Valdez* spill, BP (then known as British Petroleum) faced a spill off the coast of Huntington Beach, California in 1990 when its *American Trader* tanker ran over its anchor. Approximately 400,000 gallons of crude oil spilled into the Pacific Ocean, affecting fifteen miles of coveted California coastal areas in a highly populated region. The spill triggered a large, rapid intergovernmental response and was deemed as effective crisis management to the oil spill crisis (Merryman, 1994). British Petroleum was largely lauded for

its response to the *American Trader* spill by government officials and presented favorably in media accounts of the accident.

Government leaders and observers also noted that preventative measures were needed arising from lessons learned from the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader* spills, among others (Churm, 1990). Two decades later, however, BP would endure immense criticism for their lack of sufficient crisis planning and reaction to the *Deepwater Horizon* spill in the Gulf of Mexico, exacerbated by comments attributed to key executives. Many comparisons and analogies to the Exxon *Valdez* were made during the crisis and researchers continue to compare the two crises and the companies' response to them. As such, the two disasters became inextricably linked.

The BP Gulf oil spill in 2010 is important because of its magnitude (Black, 2010), its environmental and human impact (Barnshaw, et al. 2013; Gill et al., 2012; Picou, 2011) and the company's poor management of its communication during the crisis (Choi, 2012; Diers-Lawson & Pang, 2016; DuBois, 2010; O'Connor, 2011). In addition to the loss of life and significant financial impact on BP, additional negative impacts affected hundreds of thousands of people. Gulf shore businesses, residents and local economies were harmed by the crisis that increased negative perceptions of BP and oil exploration by the general public along with additional restrictions placed on oil and gas exploration for the entire industry (Clifford, 2010; Davenport, 2016; Jarvis, 2010). While BP's crisis planning should have involved scenarios such as a well explosion at low depths—given the nature of the exploration, BP also repeated or reconstructed many of the mistakes that Exxon committed during their infamous Exxon *Valdez* crisis.

Failure to Plan for the Worst

The BP Gulf oil spill resulted in other effects and consequences such as increased scrutiny and regulation of the oil and gas industry along with a crisis of leadership for the

administration of President Barack Obama and U.S. government in its ability to respond effectively to a major crisis (Lilley & Firestone, 2013; Safford, et al., 2011). Although twenty years apart, the BP Gulf oil spill crisis and the Exxon *Valdez* crisis demonstrate organizational failures in managing a crisis and the failure of top executives in their ability to communicate effectively. BP's Gulf oil spill provides valuable insights and lessons for researchers and practitioners that highlight repeated mistakes in planning and response, along with a comparative analysis with what many consider to be the world's previous worst-oil spill-ever, the Exxon *Valdez*. Exxon was widely criticized for not implementing an effective and efficient CMP, refusal to provide the media with information, and lack of care (Lando, 2014). The company was also cited for failure to adequately plan and prepare for such a disaster (DuBois, 2012). Lack of foresight in planning and mistakes post-crisis eruption compounded the impacts associated with these giant spills and magnified the negative perception of the management of the crisis by the offending actors, Exxon and BP respectively. Furthermore, both Exxon and BP have been roundly criticized for their communicative responses during the crises that likely exacerbated the organizational impact and damage to their corporate images.

The Exxon *Valdez*

The Exxon *Valdez* oil spill in 1989 resulted in considerable financial loss for Exxon, damage to a coveted environmental area, a loss in reputation and reputational capital, and increased industry regulations. While regulators, experts, critics and Congress had considered the possibility of a catastrophic oil spill prior to the Exxon *Valdez*, the crisis provided the impetus for Congress to strengthen federal oil pollution laws, streamline regulations and oversight, and establish and clarify cleanup funding (Birkland, 1997; Sylves, 1998; Sylves & Comfort, 2012). Exxon's management of the *Valdez* crisis was roundly criticized. At the time,

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Exxon and others in the industry had plans in place for spills and believed they had the capacity to address a disaster contingency for the risk associated with oil production and delivery. On paper, at least, Exxon was prepared for a catastrophe (Peak, 1990, p. 16). The crisis did, however, spur the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 passed by Congress and signed into law by President George H.W. Bush, streamlining and strengthening oil exploration regulations and increasing cleanup funds available for future oil crises. While much was learned from the Exxon *Valdez* spill, many deficiencies or lesson forgotten were exposed nearly two decades later during the BP Gulf oil crisis.

Exxon paid dearly for the *Valdez* as well as suffering the distinction of the most prominent (and perhaps mismanaged) oil disaster for the next two decades. Some (e.g. DuBois, 2012; Haycox, 2012; Holusha, 1989; O'Connor, 2011; Peak, 1990) suggest that better planning, a quicker response, a more apologetic approach, and better corporate communication would have limited the damage to the environment, those affected, and Exxon itself. A failure to integrate prevention, planning, and response hindered the ability to manage the crisis when their critical safety system failed, leading to the most infamous oil spill disaster of its time (Harrald, et al. 1990). The Exxon oil spill is often referred to when subsequent accidents involving oil spill make their way into the media and garner public attention.

Low-probability, high-consequence events are not easy to plan for as most organizations are more prepared for more likely, less severe events. Preparing for oil spills is difficult because they are rare and the impacts are far greater than more routine problems (Harrald, et al. 1990). This, coupled with reduced regulation between the *Valdez* and Gulf oil spill and a lack of clarity regarding governmental responsibility and jurisdiction added to the negative perception of response and management. Clearly, Exxon's delay in responding and a lack of a clear message

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from them or governmental agencies damaged any perception that the company had the capacity to deal with such a crisis or that it would be resolved and mitigated soon after the event. This perception was compounded by the relative silence from CEO Lawrence Rawl for days following the spill as well as communicating with the public ineffectively through the media (O'Connor, 2011).

Two decades after the Exxon disaster and the criticism that erupted from it, BP found itself making similar mistakes during the *Deepwater Horizon* Gulf oil spill crisis. While BP invested considerable resources toward containment and developed a communication strategy, the organization produced mixed messages arising from comments and actions by its CEO, Tony Hayward. Crises naturally produce significant scrutiny on an organization. Much of the scrutiny was on its planning and preparation (or lack thereof) for potential crises as well as the timing and insufficiency of its response. However, a company's communication practices can undermine what may ultimately prove to be effective mitigation given the uncertainty that surrounds a crisis in its early stages. Statements and public comments attributed to Tony Hayward undoubtedly undermined BP's efforts at communicating with the public and stakeholders during the Gulf oil spill and further damaged the company's reputation as well as raised more concerns regarding fuel exploration and production.

Research Questions

Crisis management has now coalesced into a truly multi-disciplinary field and if the field is to advance, more interdisciplinary research efforts need to be nurtured and promoted (Piotrowski, et al., 2010). Although the crisis literature has expanded significantly since various disciplines contributed to the domain after the Johnson & Johnson Tylenol poisoning crisis in 1982, further articulation and exploration is needed as demonstrated by prominent crises and

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inadequate responses. By evaluating similar examples (same types of crises in similar sectors) and examining these cases in the context of prior crises in similar events, researchers can gain a better understanding of the impact of certain features of the crisis contexts. Relatedly, communication strategies and rhetoric during a crisis play an important role in the perception of a company's crisis management performance. While communication cannot resolve a crisis itself, effective crisis communication is an essential element in determining the level of perceived success an organization has in managing a significant crisis (Blythe, 2011; Coombs, 2014; Diers-Lawson & Pang, 2016; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Fink, 1986; Hearit, 1996; 1994; Umer et al., 2011).

Evaluating the lessons that should have been learned from prior crises of a similar nature and comparing them to actions of a subsequent crisis of a similar nature may shed light on barriers that inhibit companies in their crisis preparation and response protocols. This is particularly important regarding the communication conduct of executives during a crisis which play a vital role in determining the success of crisis management efforts. The results and conclusions may provide an impetus for real organizational learning through changes in organizational culture driven by its leaders. Furthermore, examining research that examines prominent examples such as the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spill can demonstrate characteristics and variables consistent with or contradictory to organizational learning and encourage further examination and exploration. As such, the following research questions are proposed:

R_1: What was the substance of the communication response of Exxon and BP after their respective crises?

R_2: What is the relationship between crises similar in nature separated by time?

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To answer these questions, for RQ$_1$ I will examine the public statements and comments attributed to both Exxon and BP's executives during their respective crises as well as any behaviors or actions taken during the crisis that contradicted the intended organizational messaging or undermine efforts of the perception of effective crisis management. I will apply Hearit's (1994, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2006) three responses to guilt: denial, shifting of blame and mortification. In so doing, I will draw upon Hearit's (2006) work connecting apologia with social legitimacy, an effort that established a paradigm for understanding crisis management through apologia with seven factors: denial, bolstering, differentiation, minimization, transcendence, corrective action and mortification.

RQ2 will examine the timing of the Exxon *Valdez*, British Petroleum *America Trader* spill, and the BP Gulf oil spill crises to determine the degree to which where and when a crisis occurs has significance relative to what the crisis is and who is perceived as responsible for causing it. Since the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader* crises occurred relatively close together, examining the perception of Exxon and British Petroleum's management of the spills may shed light on whether British Petroleum learned from Exxon's mistakes the year before, or whether the *Valdez* and Exxon's response to it was deemed so deficient that British Petroleum appeared to simply exceed low expectation or benefited from its crisis being overshadowed by Exxon's. Similarly, a comparative analysis of Exxon's management of the *Valdez* spill and BP's management of the Gulf oil spill is likely to yield interesting and useful observations. Separated by two decades, these massive crises have become linked through comparisons in the media and in academic research. BP appears to have learned some lessons either from Exxon's crisis or through advances in crisis planning and awareness—yet it seems to have failed to learn or adhere to effective crisis communication among its leadership.

The results of this proposed research can contribute to a greater understanding of the importance of effective and consistent organizational communication during a crisis and its influence on the perception of the degree of success an organization has achieved in managing a crisis. This research can demonstrate if opportunities to learn were incorporated into planning and practice, outcomes that should have been based on the experience of others in the same sector with similar circumstances. Furthermore, examining the timing of a crisis occurrence may shed some light as to whether some organizations are simply better at managing a crisis at certain points in time, or if luck, chance and randomness are just as important in the perceived success.

Organization

Having laid out the broad parameters of this study, Chapter II will go into greater depth and review the literatures on the topics of crisis management, crisis communication, and crisis learning. Relatedly, Chapter III will address the methodological choices I will make in attempting to answer the aforementioned research questions. Chapter IV, conversely, will share the results of my analysis of crisis strategies as well as the critical role of time, while Chapter V will offer a discussion of my findings as well as draw a number of conclusions and interpretations with regard to how organizations do or do not learn from the crises they face.

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CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Contemporary society is characterized by crises. These modern crises arise from the interplay of various social, political and cultural systems and they do not recognize national borders nor are they limited to particular policies or economic areas (Boin, Kofman-Bos & Overdijk, 2004; Shrivastava, 1993). Crises for companies cannot be considered improbable or rare events (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1996). This is contrary widely-held beliefs that most organizations subscribe to (LaLonde, 2007; Mitroff & Pauchant, 1990). As such, corporations are susceptible to a variety of potential crises and must plan accordingly in order to respond effectively and minimize the impact of crises on others and themselves. Still, prominent examples demonstrate that organizations continue to be unprepared for crises or fail to react to them effectively. In many organizations, scenarios with low probabilities are dismissed and energy is focused on those with high assignments (Moats, et al., 2008). This suggests that organizations and, in particular, their leaders fail to accept the likelihood that a crisis will strike them or arrogantly believe they have the capacity and ability to deal with one accordingly should it arise.

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Strategic Planning and Crisis Planning

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Strategic Planning

Strategic planning has emerged as one of the core features of modern corporations. A strategic management plan (SMP) is a formal, systematic document of an organization that establishes an organization's visions, objectives, and goals of a desired future and outlines a sequence of steps to achieve them (Allen, 2011; Jeyarathnam, 2008; Pollard & Hotho, 2006; Preble, 1997). While it often incorporates budgeting and utilizes multiple initiatives, this corporate blueprint also is a thematic reflection of an organization's culture set forth by its

executives. Most strategic plans or planning initiatives are forward-thinking documents with a focus on growth and profitability. Few incorporate crises preparation for external events that could jeopardize a company's opportunities, let alone its very existence. While strategic planning increases as environmental instability grows, few companies conceive of scenarios that could engulf their company and negate any advances made through strategic planning (Brews & Purohit, 2007; Sita, 2009). Instead of holistic planning—which would incorporate crisis preparation in strategic planning, companies that engage in crisis planning continue to do so separately from strategic planning initiatives. This suggests that leaders in organizations fail to appreciate the susceptibility to crises that they face as they fail to learn from the mistakes of other companies who were severely damaged by crises.

Crisis Planning

Organizations have become more aware of the potential that they may face a significant crisis. Natural disaster, emergency, and risk planning have now morphed into a more generalized form of crisis planning. Planning is probably the most important step to ensure an effective response using crisis and emergency risk communication (Baltes & Birsan, 2014). The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and other crises and natural disasters resulted in increases in the number of organizations who developed crisis management plans (Schoenberg, 2005). Crisis management plans (CMP) are organizational documents or policies that presents the framework, procedures, personnel and/or actions to be taken during an emergency, disaster, or crisis and will direct and organizations actions in dealing with a crisis (Hogue, 2001). The best time to develop a CMP is before a crisis occurs (Bowman 2014). Still, many organizations have either failed to create a plan of any substance or orient the organizational culture toward a more crisis-aware position.

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The implications of companies that fail to adequately plan for or respond to a crisis are severe. Post-disaster investigations usually reveal an appalling *lack* of adequate crisis preparation (Boin, Kofman-Bos, & Overdijk, 2004). Organizations that take a more proactive approach in preparation and planning for potential crises are likely to benefit by having shorter crisis periods and suffer less severe after-crisis effects (Lee, et al, 2007, p. 334). Prior to the BP spill, researchers warned of insufficiencies in planning. A twenty-year longitudinal conducted by the University of Southern California study suggested that 75% of companies are not equipped to manage a crisis and 95% are unprepared (Mitroff & Alpasian, 2003). Lee et al. (2006) state that "less than 70% of U.S corporations reported having crisis plans and teams." Davies (2005) suggests that very few organizations have crisis management plans of any quality and their plans tend to concentrate on crisis logistics as opposed to the psychological behaviors within the organization. This includes the leaders of an organization that set the culture for an organization and are charged with protecting its image and reputation. The blame for failures in preparation, response, or effective communication typically fall on the company's leaders. When a crisis erupts, the planning for and response to a crisis evokes substantial scrutiny.

The impetus for modern organizations to become prepared for a crisis must come from its leadership. A crisis exposes not only a company's weaknesses but also the deficiencies in its leadership. Many leaders of companies who are perceived as some of the best in the world before a crisis are often considered the worst of all-time after one occurs (Deans & Kalafatides, 2010). This should place crisis planning as a key priority for an organization's leader along with specific training for that leader as to how to communicate effectively on behalf of the organization during a crisis. Yet, even within industries that are most susceptible to a crisis,

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such as oil and gas, leaders have failed to learn from previous crises and often make the same or similar mistakes of others, increasing the damage to the company and its reputation.

Leadership, Culture and Organizational Preparedness

Leadership

Creating a crisis plan is not necessarily the primary indicator of an organization's preparedness. Leadership is a vital component of organizational crisis preparedness. It is a key ingredient to successful crisis management (Kielkowski, 2007). This includes the time-consuming planning process and the development of response teams and a constant focus and effective communication by the organization's leader. Even with the many high-profile, high-impact crises that have emerged over the last few decades, many organizations failed to adequate prepare for contingencies arising from actual and potential crises (Chong & Park, 2011; Fink, 1986; Lee, et al., 2006; Mitroff & Alpasian, 2003; Mitroff & Pauchant, 1990; Pinsdorf, 1995). In particular, most organizations are not prepared to deal with a crisis, let alone one that threatens its very existence (Boin, Kofman-Bos, & Overdijk, 2004). Most executives also fail to realize the impact a crisis can have on those within the organization, including those involved in the resolution of the crisis and the organization's recovery from it. A lack of recognition of the threats posed by potential crises can translate into a failure to identify the significance of the risks to an organization that an emerging crisis presents and, subsequently, can produce an inadequate and delayed response to a crisis by the company.

Since organizations continue to appear to be unprepared even given the increased threats and likelihood of facing a crisis, the leadership within these organizations have continued to fail to emphasize the importance of crisis planning. And, as such, these leaders will also impact the organizational attitude toward preparation, the implementation of remedial actions during a

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crisis, and the public perception of the organization's management of the crisis and its reputation. If the perception of a company's management of a crisis is negative, CEO's and executives are typically thought responsible and, subsequently, suffer consequences such as demotion and often dismissal or removal. Several factors influence the management of a crisis by an organization. Among the most prominent are organizational culture, leadership in planning and preparation, crisis communication and sensemaking during a crisis event. Whether or not a company's leaders have created a crisis-aware culture and emphasized preparation and crisis simulation is as important, if not more important, than creating a response plan to be implemented should a crisis arise.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture is defined as the values, actions and relationships of an organization that contribute to and influence the environment of an organization, its employees, and stakeholders (Barney, 1986; Mitroff et al., 1989; Mitroff, Pearson, & Harrington, 1996). It is the aggregate of organizational philosophy and values through the organization based on shared attitudes, beliefs, and customs often represented in written rules, guidelines, procedures, contracts and conduct and is diffused throughout the organization. Organizational culture is demonstrated by how it operates, conducts business, treats it stakeholders (employees, customers, associates and the various communities it serves, operates in, or conducts business with), and is reflected by the perception of the organization by internal members and external communities. The culture of an organization is set or heavily influenced by the executives and leaders of the organization and play important roles in its strategic planning and implementation as well as the organization's preparedness for a crisis and in its response to it.

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Mitroff, et al. (1989) define the culture of an organization as the set of rarely articulated, largely unconscious beliefs, values, norms and fundamental assumptions that an organization makes about itself, the nature of people in general, and its environment. Schein (1996) suggests that organizational culture is "the set of shared, taken-for-granted implicit assumptions that a group holds and that determines how it perceives, thinks about and reacts to its various environments" (p. 236). Each organization's culture is unique to that organization based on the synthesis of all that constitutes the organization, its vision, mission, philosophy and managerial approaches, often in the forms of unwritten rules and behavior. As such, many authors suggest that it is the culture of an organization that is often the most difficult to change (Matland & Thomson, 2014; McCormick, 2008; Patrick, 2005). This resistance to change can inhibit an organization in adopting a more crisis-readiness approach during its strategic planning process and implementing crisis awareness into the organizational culture. Furthermore, since a company's culture is reflective of the vision of key executives, if these executives do not exhibit a crisis-awareness orientation or react appropriately should a crisis arise, the organization will subsequently reflect and react with similar deficiencies.

The importance of organizational culture as exemplified by organizational leaders in crisis readiness and response is significant. Organizational culture can be a major predictor of crisis events and crises are often viewed as being perpetuated by the organizational culture (Wang, Hutchins & Garavan, 2009). An organization's culture often plays a major role in whether or not crisis management efforts are extensive and successful (Preble, 1997). The existence of a crisis management plan is necessary but not always sufficient in observing warning signs or ensuring appropriate responses by an organization and its leaders (Pollard & Hotho, 2006). Mitroff, et al. (1989) suggest that corporate culture is one of the main

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determinants in crisis management and stipulate that organizations are generally either "crisis-prone" or "crisis-prepared" (see also Sheaffer & Mano-Negrin, 2003). A crisis-prone organization, according to Mitroff, et al. (1989), is characterized by a far greater degree of narcissism or self-centeredness, a lack of adequate planning, an inflexible organizational structure, and has a high use of rationalizations. This means that a crisis-prone organization, through the orientation of its leadership, naively assumes it can adequately address a crisis should one arise even though it likely lacks the structure, capacity and cognitive abilities necessary for effective management. This false sense of security arises from top executives and permeates through the entire organization making that organization more susceptible to mistakes and a prolonged crisis episode.

Inversely, crisis-prepared organizations have a high degree of integration with the crisis plans and business plans, are more organizationally flexible and adaptive, and have a far less tendency toward rationalization (Mitroff, et al.,1989). In addition, Mitroff, et al. (1989) argue that crisis prepared organizations not only have top management support, but also have organizational designs needed during a crisis, share more resources among organizational groups, have instituted early warning systems, train for crisis situations, and have a commitment to crisis management. This suggests a psychological awareness to the threats and dangers of a crisis striking is a necessary component of crisis planning and crisis management along with physical preparations and response capacities. Sheaffer and Mano-Negrin (2003) describe organizational preparedness for a crisis as a "a state of readiness where proactive preparation and foresight for the inevitable occurrence of a crisis that can impact the entire organization give the organization the ability to effectively foresee, recognize and respond to a crisis" (p. 575). Intransigence in crisis planning translates into intransigence in crisis response. A state of

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readiness suggests an awareness of the likelihood a crisis could occur with the foresight of knowing when, what, why or how. A level of awareness, which can be manifested in a comprehensive strategic plan that incorporates crisis management planning, can and should reflect a cognition by top executives of not only a positive trajectory for the organization but also a recognition of threats to the most optimistic of outlooks.

Organizational culture permeates through the entire organization, yet the leadership is key in determining the orientation toward crisis preparedness and the ability to respond to a crisis event. This orientation will be the inclination as to whether the organization is crisis-prone or crisis-prepared (Mittroff, 1986; 1996; 2006). The lack of crisis preparedness in organizations that still persist leaves an organization acutely vulnerable. Given that the susceptibility is systemic, therefore, any crisis planning must be systemic as well. As such, so is the response conditional on the view and orientation of key executives. Still, far too many are unprepared but believe that they are prepare due to the fact that there exists a mere existence of a crisis management plan (CMP), which may make things worse should a crisis arise (Mitroff, 2006; 2015). A CMP is a document of procedures that may or may not be useful during the many varied types of crises that can occur or the changing, complicated and dynamic nature of a crisis surrounded by low information and high uncertainty. Having a plan in place for a future crisis is only useful if the people in an organization are trained to identify a crisis or potential crisis early, identify appropriate containment or mitigation measure, act promptly, and communicate effectively throughout the organization and to external audiences. A highly prepared organization not only has a crisis team and CMP, it institutes regular training exercises and scenario planning and has essential buy-in from and participation from organization leaders. This buy-in must also include the participation of leaders in the training and planning and a

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critique of their performance along with an overall evaluation of the organization's state of readiness.

"It Can't Happen Here." As many prominent examples demonstrate, companies believe they are prepared when they are not. The rather diminutive attention to the importance of planning and preparation and the need to allocate organization resources toward crisis planning may stem from the "it can't happen here" syndrome that catches many organizations off-guard or in a false sense of security (Fink, 1986; Levick, 2007; McConnell & Drennan, 2006; Turner & Pidgeon, 1997). The best crisis plan is one that anticipates the possibility—however improbable—of worst-case scenarios (Modzelewski, 1990). Similar to the strategic planning process, organizational leaders can (and should) implement the regular evaluation of CMPs, crisis communication plans, crisis management teams, and assess the organization's state of readiness for a crisis. Leaders should engage with communication and executive teams and initiate measures that allow the organization to scan the horizon for potential threats to the organization. Furthermore, organizations must realize that it is likely a significant crisis will strike their organization and recognize the potentially dire consequences that could not only alter the company's trajectory but threaten its very existence. This also places a greater emphasis on how a company communicates during a crisis in influencing or determining the perceived successfulness of its crisis management efforts. The communication strategy and implementation emanate from the top down and, therefore, rhetorically represents the level of awareness and understanding a company has toward a crisis and its impacts.

Crisis Communication and Crisis Communication Plans (CMP)

Along with other negative consequences, crises are threats to an organization's image (Barton, 2001); one goal of crisis management is to protect the image of an organization and

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repair it if damaged (Allen & Cailouet, 1994). Communication plays a key role in how an organization is perceived to have managed a crisis and is an influential, albeit difficult to measure, variable that affects the impacts and outcomes arising from a crisis. The public's understanding of a crisis and communication selections and receptivity during a crisis are inextricably linked (Nathan, 2000). Organizations perceived to have committed a wrong in relation to a crisis face a legitimacy crisis and must reestablish their legitimacy rhetorically, again underscoring the importance communication plays in managing a crisis (Hearit, 1995). An effective communication response to a crisis is as important as the material actions taken to manage one.

From a public relations perspective, effective crisis management refers to the ability of an organization to adapt to significant environmental changes and maintain the integrity and functioning of the organization. Modern organizations rely heavily on communicating with their various publics and a positive perception of the receiving audience is essential for maintaining a conducive relationship between the public and organization. In a crisis situation, the relationship between the organization and its various stakeholders become strained. Effective organizational communication during a crisis attempts to move stakeholders beyond the event to some restoration of normalcy (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011). A crisis can result in immediate changes in public and stakeholder perception. This immediate media and social media exposure may abruptly change the collective perceptions and social demands on the organization, thus rendering previously constructed strategic plans inconsequential (Boin & Lagadec, 2000). This reinforces the importance that effective communication plays in a crisis and the need for organizational voices that reflect the organizational strategy to be consistent in order to influence public perception more favorably.

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Prominent crises are characterized by an organization's rhetorical and communication strategies during a crisis. Public relations professionals play a critical role in managing a crisis (Lee, et al. 2007; Marra, 1998; Parsons, 1996). One of the primary reasons an issue becomes a crisis is when awareness of a problem filters outside of an organization. Once details of a significant event or problem become public, mastery and constraint of the story and details surrounding the event are no longer the exclusive ownership of the organization. The narrative of the crisis often comes to be owned by news media, public perception, social media, stakeholders, and governments while the company responsible often is held solely responsibility for resolving the crisis. This places communication strategy and public relations employees within the organization as the necessary and primary authors of effective crisis management. In many situations, such as crises, public relations is the most crucial constituent of "communication mix" (Jefkin & Yadin, 1998; Khodarahmi, 2009, p. 529). In addition to planning and preparation before a crisis occurs, communication is essential for coordinating a crisis response and influencing stakeholders' perception of a crisis (Coombs, 2015). The role communication plays in the management of a crisis and the public's perception of the company also underscores the importance of crisis communication planning as an essential component of being prepared for a significant event. However, prominent case studies suggest that this planning is subjected to the same weaknesses of crisis planning—the lack of leadership buy-in prior to a crisis.

Crisis Communication Plans (CMP)

One important aspect of crisis planning that often accompany the development of crisis management plans are crisis communication plans (CCP). Crisis communication plans often contain checklists with tactics and strategies along with media contacts to be utilized before, during and after a crisis. These plans and strategies provide the means to gather and release

information as quickly as possible during a crisis and assist the organization in framing the crisis and their response. Organizations that have a crisis communication plan (CCP) are better situated to appropriately address a crisis rhetorically and return to normalcy in a relatively short time (Lando, 2014). Many case studies of crises in the public relations and communication literature indicate the importance of crisis communication plans and stress the relationship between the presence and use of a comprehensive crisis communications plan and successful crisis communication (Coombs, 2012; Cornelissen, 2011; Marra, 1998). While not ensuring the resolution of a crisis, good CCPs effectively implemented can lessen the damage of a crisis on an organization and begin the process of repairing the image and reputation of an organization.

The advantage of having a pre-existing CCP is not only that the crisis will be handled effectively but they also may be of value in detecting potential crises, offering the chance to apply mitigation before they become full crises (Lando, 2014). In-depth case study analyses of several crises indicate crisis communications plans are only a part of what determines effective crisis public relations practices. This suggests that additional variables strongly influence how well an organization communicates during a crisis, which includes leadership and a crisis-aware culture (Marra, 1998). Crisis management plans should include a CCP, which emphasizes two-way symmetrical communication between an organization and the public and identifies the various components that will need to be addressed during a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2007). What is less clear is the impact that organizational leaders play in the development of the plan and, more importantly, in adhering to the rhetorical and framing strategies employed during a crisis. As will be evident in the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spills analyses, comments by the company's CEOs and other executives can produce severe backlashes toward its mitigation efforts and

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appear to undermine the framing mechanisms employed by its communication teams (Choi, 2012).

Ambiguity in Crisis Planning and Crisis Communication Preparation

Although many companies now have CMPs and CCPs, particularly larger organizations with greater resources, case studies indicate they have been insufficient for many faced when significant crises arise. Often researchers do not know what pre-event preparedness was in place, but they can assess visible damage that may have occurred (Fowler, 2009). Crisis management plans, often a perceptual indicator by executives and managers of preparedness, can actually "make it worse" when a crisis occurs because they "think they are prepared when they are not" (Britton 2016; Mitroff, 2011, 2014; Mitroff, Diamond & Apaslan, 2006). Mitroff (2011) suggests that organizations should focus on capabilities rather than simply creating a crisis management plan (Mitroff, 2014). This highlights the construct ambiguity in academia on crisiology and questions how prepared organizations really are prior to a crisis (Berkes & Ross, 2012). Ambiguity in strategic planning and in crisis planning and response (Kano, Ramirez, & Ybarra, 2007) can generate different forms of consumption and interpretation from the media, public and affected stakeholders. Ambiguity in messaging or remarks from key leaders that contradict the theme(s) promoted by the organization can, and often do, result in increased negative public interpretations heightened by the crisis event itself.

Some suggest that still more than half of all companies do not have CMPs or CCPs even given the high-profile cases and litigious society (Britton, 2016; Tanner, 2005). This demonstrates the lack of forethought given to the possibility they will face a significant crisis or to organizational hubris in believing they can effectively manage all facets of a crisis when, in all likelihood, they cannot. Planning is probably the most important step to ensure an effective

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response using crisis and emergency risk communication (Baltes & Birsan, 2014). This poses a serious threat to the company and stakeholders since statistics indicate that the average company will face a crisis every four to five years (Tanner, 2005). As Hearit (1995) notes, an organization's social legitimacy rests on its actual and rhetorical response as perceived by the stakeholders in a crisis. A failed rhetorical response undermines what may be an effective or adequate material response if the communication and nature of the crisis has resulted in a negative perception the public has toward a company involved in a crisis. This increases the importance of effective crisis communication by all key figures within an organization during a crisis and a coordinated strategy to influence the media and public perception of the company and their management of the crisis at hand.

Communicating During a Crisis

In addition to crisis planning deficiencies, organizations seem to have inadequate preparation regarding how they will communicate to stakeholders during a crisis. Leaders should hope for the best for their company but plan for the worst and this includes communicating during difficult times. This also involves their acknowledgement of the importance of their own communication during a crisis as well as ensuring a professional public relations team is in place. And, while corporate communication teams may have learned from prior experiences, prominent examples suggest that CEOs and other executives have not. Leadership is demonstrated by a chief executive officer's (CEO) ability to help an organization overcome a crisis and crisis communication by a company's leader plays a critical role in crisis management (Lucero, et al., 2009). The loss of a stable state of an organization itself causes disruptions and is an invasion of comfort zones by those affected (Coldwell, et al., 2012). The disruptions evoked from a crisis or traumatic event in addition to normal transformations will

likely have a significant psychological effect on stakeholders in addition to physical and resource impacts. In order to understand a crisis event, the perspective of members of the affected community or potential affected community is needed (Glandon, 2015). This puts increased emphasis on the vital role organizational communication plays during a crisis and its determination on the perceived success or failure of the organization's management of the crisis. As such, leaders should seek professional advice from public relations professionals (internal and external) to guide them through turbulent times. However, it appears that executives either fail to seek, are resistant to, or do not receive the proper guidance in communicating during a unique event versus normal business operations.

Crisis Spokesperson

Along with the development of crisis plans and management teams, the decision as to who should be the organization's spokesperson during a crisis is of paramount importance. Crises are characterized as hyper-media events and surrounded by high-uncertainty (Ulmer, et al., 2011). This means that the media and public's thirst for information is exponentially increased during a crisis and the details and accuracy of what a company knows, can and should release is limited, changing or suspect, while the circumstances surrounding the event are fluid. It is, therefore, important that an organization have a competent spokesperson who can handle the pressure and volatility of a crisis. An organization's level of importance for crisis communication is reflected in spokesperson training (Coombs, 2010, p. 27). Many argue that argued that organizations should identify one key spokesperson to ensure that the organization speaks with one voice (Lucero, et al., 2009; Wilson & Patterson, 1987).

The public face of the company involved in a crisis must convey the messages that help influence public perception of the company more favorably. Many researchers and practitioners

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(e.g. Chabria, 2003; Englehardt, et al., 2004; Littlefield & Quenette, 2007; Mintzberg, 1998; Nadler, 2006; Seeger et al., 2003;) suggest that a company's CEO is the most effective spokesperson during a crisis. One reason for this is for organizational credibility, that is, CEOs have a responsibility to demonstrate to stakeholders that the organization will keep its promises regarding the crisis amelioration (Ulmer, et al., 2007). The spokesperson also must represent an understanding of how the crisis has impacted others outside the company and demonstrate the competence that social legitimacy will be restored. This should be reflected in the rhetoric emanating from an organization during a crisis. Similarly, should conditions change, a CEO can give more credence to new statements and be a responsible face for the organization (Lucero, et al., 2009). Pang (2006) stipulates that the involvement of a CEO may assist an organization in adopting a more accommodating posture. Johnson & Johnson's highly acclaimed management of the 1982 Tylenol poisoning crisis is often referred to as the "gold standard" for crisis management and, in particular, for effective communication by a company during a crisis (Mitroff, 2001; Simola, 2005). Johnson & Johnson CEO James Burke "set the standard" during the Tylenol crisis by making announcements himself and, since then, it has been conventional wisdom that, during a crisis, the CEO must speak for the company (Pines, 2000). Questions remain in the literature for those who suggest a CEO should assume a primary role as a spokesperson for an organization during a crisis as to when he or she should assume that role (Lucero, et al., 2009, p. 235). Less examined is how a CEO can undermine the crisis communication strategies employed by an organization during a crisis.

Other researchers argue for several spokespersons (e.g. Littlefield, 2006) depending on areas of expertise. A CEO may not have the technical expertise necessary or knowledge as to what serves the company and type of crisis best (Fearn-Banks, 1996). This suggests that a CEO

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should focus primarily on assisting the organization in its management of the event in the manner in which he or she is most capable (Blythe, 2011). For some researchers and practitioners, the issue of whether a CEO or top executive should address the public is "when and how frequently." The distinction in much of the literature may hinge on the definition of *primary* spokesperson and the visibility of a CEO during a crisis. Pines (2000) argues that a CEO should and is expected to address the media "only in the most egregious of crises when lives are lost" (Pines, 2000, p. 15). Others suggest that a CEO should be used sparingly, addressing the media and public at key times (Blythe, 2011). Much of the literature and many of the case studies, however, highlight how comments or press appearances by CEOs and key executives impair crisis amelioration efforts and damage the public perception of the company. CEOs can, and often do, undermine existing or modified crisis communication plans and the strategic efforts of a company's public relation department to control or influence the public narrative.

Public Opinion and Crises

Companies with low public approval prior to a crisis face additional communication challenges. This is particularly acute when a crisis results in loss of life or environmental damage. For oil spills and other human-induced disasters, the organizational environment and communication message by those responsible for responding to and managing the crisis impacts the affected communities and their perception of the company management (Freudenburg & Gramling, 1994, 2011; Gramling, 1996; Gramling & Freudenburg, 2006; Gratan, et al., 2011; Molotch, 1970; Picou, et al., 1997; Safford, et al., 2012). Fink (1986) makes a distinction between the crisis or crisis event itself and management's response to it. This distinction, according to Fink, suggests that management has no control over the crisis but does have control over its presentational efforts to ameliorate it. A key indicator of an organization's effectiveness

is communicating "bad news" messages to its organizational culture (French & Quigley-Holden, 2012). If CEOs and executives have not oriented an organization toward greater crisis preparedness and exhibit the characteristics Mitroff, et al. (1989) suggest they should, executives will exacerbate the negative perception public comments of a crisis can, and often do, increase the negative impact on that organization.

Sensemaking, Response and Systems

Much of the extension of how communicators operate during a crisis (chaos) arises out of Weick's (1993) 'sensemaking' where organizations seek to make sense out of a crisis by comparing them to familiar, prior events. Since crisis are unique, exceptional and extraordinary, sensemaking by organizational actors can result in paralysis or faulty contingency decisions. What make crisis events so shattering is that both the sense of what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together (Weick, 1993, p. 634). Weick's assessment of how the rational becomes irrational during a crisis is rooted in psychology, organizational and management theory, and sociology and seeks to explain aspects of the decision-making process during a crisis. Different groups and persons can create multiple interpretations; conversely, shared meanings within an organization are important in producing and avoiding accidents or incidents that can lead to crises (Gephart, 2004; Perrow, 1994). This underscores the importance of a coordinated crisis communication strategy that permeates through all levels of an organization in order to promote a unified message during a crisis. While the public is attempting to make sense of the crisis, they look to the company and its executives for clarity. Sensemaking also may help to explain the poor communication decisions many executives exhibit during a crisis. It's essential that a leader not only comprehend the situation a company

finds itself in but also has the ability to command and direct a response to a crisis within the company as well as effectively represent the company throughout the crisis.

The high levels of uncertainty and the anomalistic properties of a crisis may impede an executive's ability to fully comprehend the magnitude of what has transpired and, thus, hinder his or her ability to effectively communicate with the public during a crisis. Misstatements by CEOs may be a result of mental bifurcation or momentary lapses in recognition of the public perception and how such comments may be received. However, repeated misstatements reflect a lack of understanding of prior cosmology episodes where organizational leaders further damaged the company's reputation and further fueled public anger toward the company. It may also reflect a lack of understanding of the impacts of the mistakes that others in their industry made during previous crises. This lack of learning or awareness should evoke corrective suggestions by subordinates in conjunction with a cognitive receptivity of the company's leader who recognize the unique nature of the circumstances.

Crises are inherently chaotic times for a company and impact the various subsystems within the organizations involved. By expanding the applications of the systems perspective to non-linear operations of large complex systems, Seeger, et al. (2002) contend that chaos theory (CT) elucidates how communication processes during a crisis relate to systems moving in and out of chaos and order (p. 269). Coombs (2009), Seeger, et al. (2002), Seeger (2006), and Sellnow, et al. (2012) all refer to aspects of CT and its application in determining effective communicative processes during chaos in a crisis situation. Since communicative functions are essential in determining the perception of successful crisis mitigation and management, the implications of chaos theory and communication theory is important and relevant to the field of crisis management. This involves the internal communication systems (detection, alarm,

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feedback) as well as the external communication process with stakeholders, the media and the public during a crisis event. Robert and Lajtha (2002) suggest that crises are characterized by the absence of obvious solutions, emphasizing the chaotic circumstances and high uncertainty that characterize crises and complicate the communicative and ameliorative processes. And, as Mitroff points out (2014), deficiencies in preparation for a crisis are systemic throughout the organization and, by extension, can involve the crisis communication team or the conduct and comments of high-level executives. There are many documented examples in crises management in which executives acted independently of their crisis management and crisis communications team, undermining their companies' efforts of a coordinated response (Fearn-Banks, 2011). This may be a psychological response to chaos and stress, poor planning and training by and for executives or perhaps simple executive hubris. Corporations have a large public relations arm that must be empowered to implement a crisis communication strategy that must be followed by all in order to be effective.

Complex organizations have increased exposures to crises. In tightly coupled systems, such as technologically advanced or with inherent risk, Perrow argues that crises are "normal" (Perrow, 1984). As such, crisis management plans and crisis communication plans, if well-developed, should in theory be effective should a crisis arise and considered all possible crises that can occur along with a myriad of responses. When an event or alteration occurs within a system, chaos results and the disruptions, changes, or alterations are magnified. More simply put, bifurcation (disorder) results and previous patterns of order are lost. Weick (1993; 1995) describes such episodes of bifurcation as cosmology episodes in which humans lose their sense of meaning and attempt to either evade the new disorder, do nothing due to the shock of the unfamiliar, or attempt to formulate a strategy to return the system to order. However, individuals

who lose their ability to make sense of the erupted disorder lack the ability to formulate and effective plan in dealing with the new conditions. High reliability organizations (HRO) may simply have a greater awareness of the risks of their operations and the high-negative impacts that may occur. As such, one would expect highly technical companies to put greater emphasis on planning, including for the low-probability/high-negative impact events. Still, many appear to be caught off guard by "normal," yet irregular, events. These cosmological episodes, or anomalies, should be recognized and treated as such by key executives and responded to appropriately.

The inherent risk in oil and gas production are evident and well-known and spills or accidents subsequently receive media attention. Public reaction to these "normal" accidents, however, is almost always negative. The works of March and Simon (1958), Allison (1971), Allison and Zelikow (1999), Nutt (1984), and Weick (1993, 1995) give insight and explanation into the decisions made during a crisis. While an organization may be predisposed to crisis susceptibility (Mitroff, 1993) due to its mindset or due to its nature of work, how an organization reacts in the early stages can determine whether the crisis is managed effectively or prolonged and with greater impact. In other words, whether an organization is "crisis-prone or crisis-prepared" (Mitroff, 1989, 1996, 2006) is not entirely a function of planning. The actions taken by an organization during a crisis to manage the crisis and minimize the negative effects are crucial to the public's perception of success as is the communication employed throughout. Unintended or ill-advised alterations from the communications strategy of the organization means that the communication is no longer strategic, rather, it is a reaction to the public comments as well as the crisis itself. In industries with a high-risk of "normal accidents" coupled with existing negative public perceptions, the focus on crisis planning is vital. Furthermore, the importance of

effective crisis communication is magnified as the impacts are often more severe and, thus, more recognized by the public.

Communicating During a Crisis: Protecting Company Reputation

The approach, messages and means an organization should adopt during a crisis has received considerable academic attention since the Tylenol cyanide poisoning crisis of 1982. Khodarahmi (2009) suggests that strategic communication should adopt an appropriate approach that does not offend anyone—if not satisfying everyone. Lucero, et al. (2009), conversely, argues that companies should attempt to reduce the offensiveness of the crisis event. Research on organizational perception management highlights the critical importance how quickly and efficaciously an impacted organization responds to and manages a crisis (Hargis & Watt, 2010; Pitrowski & Gray, 2010; Simola, 2005). An organization's response to a crisis must be planned and structured in an exceedingly uncertain, changing crisis environment in order to prevent misinformation, harmful speculation and increased damage to its reputation (Cutlip, et al., 2006; Khodarahmi, 2009). There is a right way and a wrong way to cope with a crisis (Cutlip, et al., 2006, p. 327); CEOs and other executives' poor public comments often move the communicative strategies of the organization in the wrong direction or undermine its communication team. This complicates crisis resolution and can further damage the image and reputation of the organization, which is deemed as the offender or responsible party for the crisis. The predominate focus of the crisis communication research involves reputation management efforts (Coombs, et al., 2010). CEOs and executives should realize their communication during a crisis is as important as their action and, as such, their statements will be perceived as a reflection of the image of the company or organization involved in a crisis.

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Image is essential to organizations (Britton, 2016; Benoit 1997; Brammer & Pavelin, 2006; Dowling, 1993; Javalgi, et al., 1994). A crisis can severely damage the carefully cultivated image that companies have invested considerable time and resources in—and threaten the very existence of the organization. Technological advances and increased means and frequency of communication through social media have rendered corporate reputations and images more vulnerable than ever to criticism and attack and can spread crisis awareness and negative publicity on a global scale—especially through social media (Lachlan, et al., 2016; Tucker & Melewar, 2005). There are various ways companies can accept responsibility for a crisis and its management while attempting to promote a sympathetic public face for the crisis impact (Brinson & Benoit, 1996; Taylor & Caldiero, 2005). How an organization communicates during a crisis is as important as its management actions and many scholars offer recommendations and observations for effective organizational crisis communication.

Image Repair

Benoit's (1995) image repair and theory examines strategies employed by organizations during a crisis. Benoit established five approaches (or defenses) organizations can employ when they are threatened by a crisis. They are: 1) denial, 2) evading responsibility, 3) reducing offensiveness, 4) corrective action, and 5) mortification. These approaches follow "attacks" on a company from some sort of act or event in which the company is accused of being responsible for the action (or crisis) and the act is considered offensive (Benoit, 1997). The organization, fairly or unfairly, is perceived to be responsible for the offending act and must choose a response it deems appropriate. As Benoit notes, companies often must decide between image repair strategies (including accepting responsibility and issuing apologies) and direction from its lawyers. The organization must also be cognizant to address various stakeholders along with

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potentially varied perceptions of the event and responsibility. In the case of the Exxon *Valdez*, Benoit (1997) suggests that Exxon first attempted to reduce the perceived offensiveness of the spill, minimize the negative feelings toward the corporation, and downplay the extent of the damage. These strategies, however, failed as Exxon was heavily criticized for its response and communication during the crisis and suffered significant reputational and financial damage (Small, 1991; DuBois, 2010; Haycox, 2012).

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

Coombs (1999) proposes crisis response strategies that are similar to Benoit's (1995). His seven general strategies are: 1) attack the accuser, 2) denial, 3) excuse 4) justification, 5) ingratiation, 6) corrective action, and 7) full apology. Coombs (1999) found that compassion had a significant effect on corporate and organizational reputation but also suggests that denial may be an effective strategy for some organizations (Coombs, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The decision of which strategy to employ is contingent on the nature of the crisis, perceived cause, type or size of the organization, and the likelihood the organization or company can survive the ordeal.

Coombs (2007) developed the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) as a framework for maximizing reputational protections for organizations that experience a crisis and considers how stakeholders attribute blame or responsibility for a crisis. SCCT identifies ten crisis types or frames: natural disaster, rumor, product tampering, workplace violence, challenges, technical error product recall, technical error accident, human error recall, human error accident, and organizational misdeeds (Coombs, 2007). The SCCT stipulates that a review of crisis history and the attribution of responsibility allows for organizations to plan their responses according to the type of crisis present. Coombs' (2007) efforts at applying the SCCT

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to contemporary crises showed that, in general, a history of a previous crisis intensified the attribution of responsibility and lowered perceptions of organizational reputation. Further application and articulation following Coombs work can examine whether the same results are found between organizations within a sector that have experienced similar crises and whether attribution theory and reputational damage is transferred from one organization to another (i.e. the guilt-by-association analogy).

Coombs & Holladay (2012) also note the risks companies face in the potential threats through social media. They suggest that organizations must be vigilant in scanning the virtual world as increases in communication and interconnectedness produce increases in threat potentials due to information and opinion dissemination along with expansions in what constitutes stakeholders. Crisis identification, or the recognition of warning signs which often emerge through social media, allows organizations to intervene early. A threat or potential threat to a company's reputation, or what Coombs and Holladay (2012) term a *paracrisis*, is information that can be or is perceived as a negative reflection on an organization. As such, Coombs and Holladay (2012) advocate that organizations should scan the social media environment and such scanning is a confluence of risk management/communication, issues management, and reputation management that identify potential threats or dangers to an organization. The focus on threat or pre-crisis identification is a valuable tool for organizations and can and should be part of their crisis planning. Coombs' paracrisis approach allows for the early construction of apologia, allowing for the creation and implementation of a response and defense to the corporate image threatened by a potential or impending crisis.

Apologia

Apologia refers to an organization's communicative defense or response to a crisis. Apologia research has grown significantly across a wide range of academic disciplines (Löwenheim, 2009). Hearit (1995, 2001, 2006) links apologia with corporate social legitimacy. Social legitimacy "is the rhetorically constructed and publicly recognized congruence between the values of a corporation and those of a larger social system in which it operates" (Dowling & Pfeiffer, 1975). Hearit (1995) identifies corporate social legitimacy as a resource that organizations utilize in order to attract consumers, recruit employees, obtain capital and materials, as well as gain social and political support. Organizational crises occur when organizations are seen to act in opposition to the social expectations of acceptable behavior— thus undermining their legitimacy. As such, companies are forced to acknowledge this violation and deliver an apologia in order to restore their legitimacy.

Face- the organization and apologia. A company must present itself in as favorable light as possible during a crisis. Goffman's (1971) early work suggested that the main function of an apology is to distinguish the "bad-self" who needs to apologize for a particular event from the truly representative "good-self." There exists an association between apology and the acceptance of responsibility as well as the expectations that the offending party will offer some form of reparation (Engerman, 2009; Mills, 2003). Apologies have been shown to reduce the negative perceptions of the transgressor, reduce public anger toward the offender and lead to levels of forgiveness toward the responsible person or party (Hargie, et al., 2010; Friedman, 2006; Scher & Darley, 1997; Struthers, et al., 2008). However, how and when an apology is delivered is a significant factor in whether it is accepted. An apology that is seen to be insincere can further damage an organization similar to one that is delayed and is seen as offered out of

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necessity rather than attempting to repair what has been damaged by the crisis' impacts and the violation of the social compact between the public and the organization (MacLeod, 2008; Skarlicki, et al., 2004).

Although it can be, an apologia is not necessarily an apology. According to Hearit, apologia is more of a process that relies on normative standards which uses ethics in crisis communication after the wrongdoing (crisis) rather than the ethics of the wrongdoing. "While an act of wrongdoing is not rhetorical, determination of the significance of the act is a decidedly rhetorical activity" (Hearit, 1995, p. 1). Hearit's work exemplifies how organizations and their communication can magnify the negative perception of an organization in a crisis and undermine its legitimacy by employing poor or inflammatory rhetoric during a crisis that undermines remedial actions and reconciliation efforts taken by the organization. As Hearit (1995) notes, the fact that companies "must fulfill a competence and community requirement to realize legitimacy reveals an inherent tension in managerial decision-making" (p. 3). This reiterates the importance of conveying messages to the public during a crisis that attempt to re-establish legitimacy and repair the damage done to the public's trust of the company. A company has violated some social trust or expectation. As such, the public expects some form of repair and apologia. Choosing the right words when addressing the public during a crisis is of paramount importance in reestablishing social trust in conjunction with protecting the reputation and image of the company involved.

An ethical apologia must be: truthful, sincere, voluntary, timely, addresses all stakeholders and be performed in an appropriate context (Hearit, 2006). The truthfulness and sincerity of an apology, Hearit suggests, must demonstrate a good-faith effort at resolving the problem through actions as well as possess a communicative function. While the truth of

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admitting a wrongdoing can be modified to meet the strategic objectives of an organization, it must be based on the reality of 'the facts of the case' (Hearit, 2006, p. 84). This affords an organization an opportunity to acknowledge the transgression and the harm it may have caused, while maintaining the organization's objective of overcoming the crises and moving forward once some form of effort at corrective action is taken. This contention also allows companies the ability to communicate with some flexibility to all the varied stakeholders that have an interest in the crisis as well as the organization and maintaining or restoring its reputational capital. Apologia, therefore, can involve strategies that can be implemented during a crisis to meet the needs of the organization involved while acknowledging the harm that its wrongdoing has caused.

While Hearit has applied his work on apologia to a number of companies and case studies (i.e. Chrysler, Intel, Johnson Controls, religious institutions, etc.), his work on the Exxon *Valdez* crisis is particularly relevant to this dissertation. Hearit (1995) notes that public outcry from the spill was intense and Exxon was criticized heavily by prominent government leaders for the inadequacy of their initial response. With the varied interest of the stakeholders involved, including different levels of government, Exxon was subjected to public outrage as preliminary information came to light. Captain Joseph Hazlewood was accused of drinking the night the Valdez struck the reef and turning the navigation duties over to a subordinate. Furthermore, it was alleged that Exxon knew of Hazlewood's drinking problem and used this as a reason or excuse for the cause of the accident, suggested by Exxon's then-president Frank Iarossi (Fearn-Banks, 2007). Exxon's strategy was to focus on the cleaning up the spill and seemingly dismissed the importance of communicating effectively during the crisis (Koopmans & Vliegenthart, 2011). Exxon CEO Rawl's well-known aversion to the media was acutely

problematic given this circumstance and his silence was not well-received by the public, particularly those impacted in Alaska. He also he failed to immediately visit the site of the spill and address the media, further hindering Exxon's chances at positively influencing the public perception and media coverage and conveying a sense of responsibility and apologia.

Exxon also failed to address the full range of stakeholders impacted by the spill, and their slow response, overestimation of a technological fix, and attempts to shift responsibility for the spill caused additional problems for the company. Their repeated reference to the spill as "an accident" undermined the social legitimacy of Exxon and significantly damaged its reputation. Exxon's actions undermined its corrective action strategies and the company seemed unable to find the words to fully accept responsibility, offer a meaningful apology, and repair the damage it had done. As the criticism mounted, Exxon even attempted to present a public apology by taking advertisements in newspapers nationwide. While newspapers articles generated the most news stories on the events, the impact of the advertisements was not what Exxon was hoping (Fearn-Banks, 2007; Koopmans & Vliegenthart, 2011).

The timing of the apology by Exxon also contributed to the negative perception of its social legitimacy. Waiting two weeks after the spill to take out the advertisements, the sincerity of the apology was in question and may have been viewed a necessary rather than voluntary. It is important that an apology not be issued too late (Frandsem & Johanson, 2007). An apology following a prolonged delay is more likely to be perceived as insincere and seen as strategic rather than genuine (Hargie, et al., 2010). Exxon failed at many of the stages of the long process at crisis recovery effectively reestablishing social legitimacy. As Hearit notes, legitimacy crises leave permanent skepticism (1995). This skepticism appears to have continued to percolate in the

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oil and gas industry attributable to the attention given to the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill crisis. This skepticism erupted when BP's *Deepwater Horizon* drill rig exploded twenty years later.

Exxon saw a reemergence of media attention of the Exxon *Valdez* spill as the media compared BP's 2010 Gulf oil spill with the 1989 disaster, including BP CEO Tony Hayward's frequent communication fails throughout the crisis. Hayward's now infamous comment to the media that he would "like his life back," was dubbed by *The New York Times* as "the sound bite from hell" and in contrast to how BP handled the *American Trader* tanker spill less than a year after the Exxon *Valdez* disaster (Jaques, 2015). The three crises became linked through the media and public attention given to the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster. This dissertation examines the number of media references and stories dedicated to the three crises as well as the frequency where the crises were mentioned in conjunction with the others.

CEOs' Failure to Learn

Crisis preparedness, crisis management and crisis response go hand-in-hand (Blythe, 2002). What the literature and case studies make clear is that crisis preparedness and the ability to manage crisis situations arises out of the corporate culture promoted by top managers. Executives and managers that naively perceive "it can't happen here" (Pearson & Clair, 1998; Wang, 2008) and are thus unable to respond with rhetorical effectiveness even if the organization begins to get a grip on the crisis at hand. Organizational preparedness is first and foremost about creating a "crisis mind-set" among the leaders of an organization and managers must understand if their culture helps or hinders the management process, particularly during an organizational crisis (Schannon, 2006, p. 21). The issue of why CEOs and other executives often make a crisis worse during a crisis is through their remarks and conduct is interesting considering the abundance of examples where the CEOs statements or actions make it worse, notably during oil-

related crises. A CEO needs to appear caring, contrite and responsible and his or her words must be chosen carefully—and actions must match the words (Scudder, 2010). As Coombs (1999, 2006, 2007), Coombs & Holladay (2002, 2009), Benoit (1995, 1997, 2004) Hearit (1994, 1995, 2001, 2006) and others emphasize the crucial role communication plays in crisis management, further articulation of how key executives communicate during a crisis impact the perception of effectiveness can reaffirm the importance of an effective communication strategy throughout and organization.

It is puzzling as to why CEOs and their organizations fail to learn from the mistakes others made during previous crises, especially given that some had already experienced. This is particularly notable when considering high-profile crises incurred by others in their industry or sector of a similar nature or with similar characteristics. Whether it is the passage of time between crisis events, organizational hubris, naiveté or the continued shortcomings in an orientation toward crisis awareness and crisis preparation warrants further examination among scholars. While ill-suited comments during a crisis feed the media coverage and increase negative perceptions of companies involved in a crisis, they also provide researchers opportunities to evaluate and examine the disconnect between carefully orchestrated crisis communication strategies and public comments of executives. The apologia many corporate public relations departments incorporate into their strategy from lessons learned is interesting in case where the same companies' executives appear to have failed to learn and implement the same lessons or stay on a carefully crafted crisis response plan. Research supports the prevalence of the problem of the misperception by CEOs of what constitutes effective, positive communication during a crisis (French & Quigley-Holden, 2012). This makes an examination of prepared statements and executives' unscripted comments warranted and can contribute to the

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emerging field of crisis communication. Since reputation is a key asset of an organization and executives are the public face of an organization and influence the culture of an organization, their comments during a crisis reported in the media become an important part of the public's perception of the communicative response of the company to the crisis as well as its management of it.

Learning Organizations and Leadership

Learning organizations are characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed toward shared values or principles (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). Learning organizations, by definition, share commonalities with strategic management principles as well as crisis preparedness, response, and management theories and practices. Learning helps to manage uncertainty (Moynihan, 2008) a primary characteristic of what constitutes a crisis and makes control, mitigation and amelioration difficult. Similar to crisis planning, crisis response and crisis communication are strongly related to organizational culture, set forth and promoted by a company's CEO and executives. The management of organizations should view crisis response not as a procedure but as a living system within their organization and enable this system to achieve its purpose, which is to effectively manage and recover from a crisis (Paraskevas, 2006). CEOs are hired and compensated for success (Graeme, et al., 2010) and, therefore, may suffer from the shortcomings observed in strategic planning where growth and opportunity are sought after and not a propensity for how to manage a crisis that threatens the organization. Research has shown that the experience of repeated success creates screens that are particularly blinding in an organization (Veil, 2011, p. 124).

Leaders of large corporations can fall prey to a fall sense of organizational security and a false sense of their own ability to manage a crisis and the public relations efforts that come with it (Britton, 2016). Subordinates are reticent to come forward with bad news that may forebode a potential crisis and reluctant to privately criticize the communication performance of a powerful executive (Graeme, et al., 2010; French & Quigley-Holden, 2012). This creates blind spots for crisis awareness and prevention as well as allowing a CEO or other executive to continue to undermine the communication strategies of the organization. Lower-ranking actors feel inhibited in engaging in key behaviors that reflect on their willingness or ability to reflect on mistakes and shortcomings. The security that these actors perceived they have are predictors in learning in organizations and groups (Baer & Frese, 2005; Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010; Bunderson & Reagans, 2011). While CEOs and executives may feel empowered to risk-taking relative to opportunity-seeking initiatives in regular business opportunities for goal-attainment, this same freedom may make them feel immune to the repercussions and backlash associated with a crisis. Organizational power and status differentials may compromise organizational learning by keeping lower-ranking employees from raising concerns in crisis planning or during a crisis, meanwhile emboldening executives to engage in behavior that may further exacerbate the negative impacts that accompany a crisis (Bunderson, Reagans, & Olin, 2011).

A crisis becomes worse from a reputational and image perspective as the media and public make no distinction between a CEO's comments and a planned crisis communication strategy. The media first tend to look to the CEO as the company's spokesperson, as he or she must stand behind the company in times of crises (O'Rourke, 2005; Parsons, 2002). The person the organization chooses to be its spokesperson is a message to the public about the severity of the crisis. If the CEO blunders the public relations, the company has nowhere upwards to go, as

the CEO is the face of the company (Phillips, 2013). If a CEO responds inappropriately to a crisis, the effects can be devastating on the company and the career of the CEO (Parsons, 2002). The perception of a crisis ultimately affects the outcome of a crisis for the company involved and effective communication should be the company's top priority (Penrose, 2000). Many CEOs seem to amplify blame outrage against themselves and their companies and not the suggested event outrage aimed at the crisis itself (Lachlan & Spence, 2010). As such, communication mistakes by CEOs and other top executives demonstrate a failure in crisis planning and a failure of the organization and CEO to learn from the prominent examples of the mistakes of others, particularly those within their industry.

Threat Rigidity

A crisis reveals much about a company and its capacity to effectively manage a threat. Since leadership is a vital for organizational crisis preparedness and successful crisis management (Kielkowski, 2007), the conduct of an organization's leader may give insight into an organization's response, an organization's crisis readiness, and the level involvement a leader has in an organization's crisis planning, crisis management and crisis communication. "Threat rigidity" has received attention from scholars (e.g. Barrett & Pratt, 2000; Fink, et al., 1971; Mitroff, et al., 1992) and its impact on organizational members during a crisis (Barrett & Pratt, 2000; D'Aveni & McMillan, 1990; Mitroff, et al., 1992). Threat rigidity is defined as a company's failure to alter its response to environmental change or a sudden event (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). During a crisis threat rigidity may evoke a response by an individual or group that is instinctive or learned but may be very inappropriate for the situation and make matters worse (Zajonc, 1966). This concept also may explain the inept communication

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reactions often produced by company executives where their responses are based on habit or routine rather than an understanding of the uniqueness and severity of an event.

Researchers suggest that threat rigidity often provides missed opportunities for organizations to learn and respond adequately to a problem before it becomes a crisis (Fink, et al., 1971). The literature suggests that psychological and organizational factors induce threat rigidity in CEOs and other key executives that impede their ability to react and communicate promptly and appropriately during a crisis. In their communication with stakeholders during a crisis, many CEOs appear to have but ignored or dismissed the pitfalls that others before them experienced during their crisis. What is interesting, particularly in the oil and gas industry, is an apparent failure to learn by top executives from the messaging mistakes made in prior crises—mistakes that amplified the negative perception of the company involved in the crisis. The Exxon *Valdez* should have provided important lessons for other companies in the oil and gas industry in their prevention of and planning for accidents and, importantly, in how to communicate effectively should a spill occur (Fearn-Banks, 2011).

Comparing Crisis Responses

Recent crises suggest that established, large organizations with considerable resources continue to appear to be unprepared to effectively identify, respond and recover when a crisis arises. This is particular acute in failures of leaders to recognize the significance of a crisis, react promptly and communicate effectively to the public. Researchers have recently analyzed the Exxon *Valdez* spill with the BP Gulf oil spill (e.g. Gill, et al., 2012; Kling, et al., 2012; Penrose, 2000; Slyves & Comfort, 2012). Evaluating and comparing the performances of the respective CEOs offers additional analysis on the rhetorical impact that public comments can have on stakeholder perception. For example, Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl often is excoriated for his

handling of the *Valdez* oil spill (Modzelewski, 1990), and comparisons with BP's Tony Hayward are often made in the media and in the crisis literature (e.g. Chen, 2010; Choi, 2012; French & Quigley-Holden, 2012; O'Connor, 2011; Platter, 2011; Watson, 2017). Understanding the significance of past events within the context of the present can be facilitated by the analysis of particular aspects of past experience (Knight, 2012, p.350); continued failures in CEO communication during crises may raise important areas for future research as to why CEOs impede the preparedness of organizations as it relates to crisis events.

Media Influences on the Perception of the Effectiveness of Crisis Management

A crisis becomes acute when the public's attention is focused on the event by media. Relatedly, through media, the public also obtains information on the cause of the event and suggestions of attribution as to the cause, as well as steps an organization is taking to mitigate the impacts of the crisis. The influence of news agencies on society is often conceptualized in terms of gatekeeping (Welbers, et al., 2016). Gatekeeping is defined as the culling and crafting of large amounts of information into selective or limited messages that reach the public each day and determines which events are newsworthy (Artz & Murphy, 2000; Lewin, 1947; Shoemaker, 1991; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; White, 1959). Large crises trigger "hot-issue publics." Grunig (1997) defines hot-issue publics as a public "active only on a single problem that involves nearly everyone in the population and that has received extensive media coverage" (p. 13). While often described in terms of macro-issues (energy shortages, climate change, health care, the national debt, etc.), large-scale disasters and the agitated publics they create clearly fit Grunig's definition. Although climate change has a tangible effect on the population at large, it is media coverage that establishes connectivity of audiences toward a crisis or natural disaster to more distal populations who may not feel or recognize the impact of the crisis directly. Catastrophes

attract attention from outside the communities immediately impacted and it is through mass media that detailed and extensive sociopolitical coverage occurs, thus expanding the impact to an even greater population (Quarantelli, 2006).

One of the many features that distinguishes a crisis from a problem or issue is the damage to an organization's reputation and image (Benoit 1997; Brammer & Pavelin, 2006; Coombs, 2012; Dowling, 1993; Javalgi, et al., 1994). A company's reputation is a valuable asset made up of a perceptual representation of a company's past actions as well as its future prospects (Formbrun, 1996; Fornbrum & Gardberg, 2000). This suggests that understanding and interpretation of a crisis plays an instrumental role in how the public perceives an organization while in the midst of various phases in a crisis. Organizations, in turn, react to crises communicatively as threats to their reputation (Schultz, et al., 2011) but must also accurately identify the threats the crisis poses to stakeholders and the public. Unfortunately, many organizations have responded in ways that have made prior crises worse (Starbuck, et al., 1978); indeed, companies with a history of similar crises face an intensified reputational threat with the emergence of each new one (Coombs, 2004).

This dissertation suggests that industries with a history of similar crises, like the oil and gas industry, face intensified reputational threats due to their own past experiences and the experiences of others in the industry. The public has a negative perception of the oil and gas industry, and the media often constructs narratives surrounding a crisis that often align with these pre-existing perceptions (Corso, 2010; Spangler & Pompper, 2011). Furthermore, the public plays a large role in media coverage on the environment (Anderson, 1991; Corbett, 1998; Greenberg, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2010). The expansion of the different media available to share news stories also amplifies reputational threats as information and opinions are diffused

rapidly and to more people, increasing the negative perceptions of the public on an already unpopular industry. Relatedly, the negative perception of a crisis is amplified by the misstatements and ill-advised comments of key executives, which again functions to ~~and can~~ increase media coverage and induce additional negative coverage and reputational threats.

Roger's (1962) diffusion theory has been widely used in multiple disciplines throughout the last half century. Originally conceived to explain how innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system, diffusion theory has been applied in a variety of useful ways (Rogers, 1962; 1995; Sung & Hwang, 2014). As used here, the diffusion of information regarding crises helps to shape the perception individuals, groups and subgroups feel toward organizations involved in a crisis. The concept of diffusion is particularly relevant for crisis research as modern crises are characterized by high-levels of media attention and public awareness.

Technology and Diffusion

With the advance of technological innovation, public awareness of crises and information sharing has grown exponentially (Lachlan et a., 2016; Walther & Parks, 2002; Westerman, Spence, & Van Der Heide, 2014). The diffusion of news and information in the modern era has a direct effect on the public perceptions of an organization involved in a crisis. While blog, tweets and other opinion or reactionary-generated comments spread throughout communication mediums, newspaper articles on stories of interest continue to be the primary source of information and perceptions about crises (Schultz, et al., 2011). Research has shown that crisis events with certain characteristics are more likely to be diffused through the media (Koopmans & Vliegenthart, 2011). Subsequently, social media and the internet have been used to shape the content of traditional television and newspaper journalism and user interest and generate media

attention (Koopmans & Vliegenthart, 2011; Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Messner & Terilli, 2007; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004).

For crisis events, individuals look for cues concerning the way to react to a crisis and what actions to take and will continue to scan the media seeking clarification, new information, or validation for their perception of the event (Lachlan & Spence, 2010; Lachlan et al., 2016). This demonstrates that media coverage and the access to and sharing of information through a new, vast spectrum of communication channels greatly impact the perception of an organization in its management of a crisis. Furthermore, not only do the facts or specifics of an event shape the views of individuals regarding the management of a crisis, prominent examples demonstrate how statements or comments attributed to the CEO or executives of a company undermine a company's crisis communication strategies.

Since crises evoke significant media coverage and reactions from the public through social media, the crisis communication strategies employed by a company are vital in attempting to influence media frames and public perception. The media, as traditional gatekeepers, can act or react to the public's interest and move a crisis to the center stage of news coverage (Nelkin, 1988); in so doing, the organization's actions before and during a crisis add potential new angles of stories to cover during a crisis. Therefore, not only should communicating after a crisis address the public beyond those immediately impacted by the crisis as well as be timely, the company needs to be consistent in its messaging (Ulmer, et al., 2015). Contradictions in messaging and tone can add to the uncertainty that accompanies a crisis and add to the public's frustration and negative perception of the company involved. Involvement in an issue by the public is due to anger, concern, and recognition of personal connections with the hot issue (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012). The company's response to a crisis can stoke the emotions the public

has personalized or attributed to the event. Controversial statements influence the perception of the organization—often quite negatively and can contradict the messaging strategies of the company.

Social Media

Social media have provided yet another avenue for bad news of crisis events to spread. Researchers in the crisis domain have begun to examine the use of social media and its relationship to crisis communication, perception and crisis management (Lachlan, et al., 2016; Lachlan & Spence, 2010; Lin, et al., 2016; Liu, et al., 2010; Maresh-Fuerher & Smith, 2016; Spence, et al., 2016; Sung & Hwang, 2014). Social media are groups of individuals who converse through interactive technology (Lin, et al., 2016; Mayfield, 2008). The agenda-setting role traditional news has played in shaping public perception, attitudes and opinions (Lerbinger, 2011) has been supplemented by the internet and social media (Song, 2007). Social media allows for contact with stakeholders and an opportunity to promote a company, its services and objectives, while eliciting valuable feedback. For public relations professionals, the internet and social media have added new dynamics to crisis planning, preparation and response. Crises can arise by being identified in social media (Sung & Hwang, 2014) and, as such, companies must play an active role in monitoring their social media presence. In sum, a crisis-prepared organization can utilize social media to identify potential crises (i.e. consumer complaints that may lead to recalls, social protests that affect the company, etc.) and to maintain positive relationships with stakeholders that are useful should a crisis arise. The interconnectedness that characterizes modern society is a double-edged sword for companies as they implement their strategic and crisis planning initiatives. People actively search the internet for information regarding crises (Jin, Liu & Austin, 2011; Spence, et al., 2006; Lachlan, et al., 2016). News,

opinions and rumors spread almost immediately and, as such, require a close to instant reaction from corporate communicators. In sum, for a corporation, modern communication media present a nexus where crises both can be identified through the or originate. Similarly, old information that that has not received much attention may be retrieved through internet sources and made current, evoking controversy (i.e. lawsuit settlements, sexual harassment accusations, product defects, etc.). Said another way, issues or problems once thought to be resolved, dormant or silenced can receive new life through exchanges on social media platforms.

Social Media, the Internet and the Changing Gatekeepers

The advent of social media also has resulted in dramatic changes in the dissemination of information, opinions and messages. This provides yet another avenue for immediate and continuous social exchanges and is changing the face of crisis communication, changing the role of gatekeepers (Chewning, 2015). Social network sites like *Twitter* and *Facebook* have become crucial in everyday communication (Hong, 2014) and have been used to shape the content of traditional television and newspaper journalism by influencing coverage of stories that previously would not have been covered (Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Messner & Terilli, 2007; Sung & Hwang, 2016; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004). This may both highlight or counter existing biases in media coverage by editors' who previously would have been influenced by their own backgrounds and the organizations they represent (Sylvie & Huang, 2008). While the internet is now considered an additional or alternate news medium (Song, 2007), research is now emerging on the influence and impact of social media on crises and public perception (e.g. Lachlan & Spence, 2010; Lachlan, et al., 2016; Marsh-Fueher & Smith, 2016; Schultz, Utz & Goritz, 2011; Utz, Schultz, & Glocka, 2013; Sung & Hwang, 2014). This provides researchers

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with additional opportunities to examine information dissemination and public perception during crises along with raising new concerns and challenges for crisis communicators.

The role of traditional media as gatekeepers of news and their perception of what events or issues are newsworthy is now challenged by social media. User-generated content has become part of the media—and social media provides a platform for publics to criticize or approve media messages and bring these perspectives back into conventional media spaces (Carr, 2012). Changes in technology and communication are now influencing what the media covers due to what issues or events the public has expressed an interest in. However, the social media and internet world do still rely on traditional news sources for their primary information, and often use that information to comment on or respond to. -This symbiotic relationship adds additional nuances and concerns for organizations involved in a crisis since, since social media users rely on traditional news sources for information, crises can now develop through social media (Schultz, Utz & Goritz, 2011).

The characteristics of crises determine their newsworthiness and public attention. Media scholars have identified particular types of events that influence their chances of capturing media attention and increasing the probability of media coverage (Koopmans & Vliegenthart, 2011). As noted, large disasters and crises inherently gain a lot of attention (Birkland, 1997; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2015; Tucker & Melewar, 2005); the public becomes acutely aware of hot issues and monitors their progress and ramifications (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012). The rapid diffusion of specialized and interactive new technologies may intensify issues the public is interested in and polarize the public, through their information selection, to more extreme positions the issues of or events (Havick, 2000; Sunstein, 2002). Since crises are unique and often involve corporations who are easily vilified, constant exposure that is critical in nature will

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likely increase the negative perception of that company and further damage its reputation. This damage often is amplified by poor communication, as incomplete responses or incomplete information can now be disseminated through more mediums. Unlike traditional media sources present during the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader* oil spill crises, social media allows users to share news stories on crisis event and increase diffusion; they can attach commentary to news stories that express their opinion and potentially influence the opinion of others.

The characteristics of crises often influence the nature of the public response. The organizations involved in a crisis and the responses are often displayed through the internet and social media which may be initially missed by the traditional media or the elite. These characteristics include the type of event, its magnitude, how the event is managed, the perceived repetition of similar, prior causal factors, and the emotional value of an event will cause a massive public reaction (Zoetman, et al., 2010). Environmental concerns, vulnerability and social connections all play central roles in shaping the way people and groups of people experience and perceive crises (Arata, et al., 2000; Cutter, et al., 2003; Freudenburg, 2000; Gill, et al., 2012; Picou, et al., 1997; Safford, Ulrich, & Hamilton, 2012). Recall of references to crises past may increase the negative perception of the public toward the event, companies involved in these crises, and even to an entire industry.

Since the public has an interest in events that impact the environment (Corbett, 1998; Greenberg, 2001), corporate crises that result in significant environmental damage generate considerable interest as well as evoke strong emotions such as anger, concern and a desire for some form of proportional justice (Coombs & Holladay 2007; Weiner, 2006). The interest in such events are reflected both in media stories—driven by consumer interest and appeal—and in exchanges on social media. Therefore, organizations involved in a crisis that results in loss of life

or environmental damage must present messages that acknowledge these emotions and as well as reassure publics that the company will assume responsibility for the crisis. A failure to do so communicatively further stokes the anger the public has toward the organization.

Oil Spill Crises, the Media and the Dissemination of News and Opinions

Since oil spills evoke considerable attention, effective communication strategies are vital in protecting the reputation of companies already viewed negatively by the public. This perception is influenced during a crisis where journalists of exploit a crisis with high levels of interpretive and unbalanced framing of the crisis (Olsson, et al., 2015). Further complicating matters is the concept of gatekeeping. While this term has been applied to media decisions regarding what stories to produce and from what perspective, it also applies to the relationship between journalists and the corporations involved in a crisis or major event. Journalists often perceive an institution's spokesperson or executives as institutional gatekeepers that influence their perception of their credibility (Reich, 2011). They often see their goals of objectivity incompatible with a PR practitioner's desire for favorable coverage and can interpret that motive as a form of interference. As a result, they increasingly scrutinize, often with suspicion, the motives of those addressing the media (Cameron, et al., 1997; Curtin, 1999). This makes the communication strategies employed by a company's public relations department and the ability for those addressing the media to speak with consistency all the more important. Deviations, mistakes or contradictions function to heighten journalistic scrutiny and often make their way into news stories, playing to the negative perceptions that the public likely has already attributed to the organization.

Since it has been argued that the news media set a social agenda by attempting to create consensus through various segments of society (Lerbinger, 2011), an examination of the

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dissemination of crisis events through various news stories demonstrates the linkage of the negative connotations to organizations responsible for the crisis. This underscores the importance of media dissemination and information-seeking as an important variable to determine the impact of the crisis on an organization's image and reputation as perceived by the audiences of the news stories. Furthermore, since time is a major element of diffusion theory (Rogers, 1962), the dissemination of information of a crisis event over time can clarify what constitutes the oft-debated life cycle of a crisis. A characteristic that distinguishes a crisis from a problem is public awareness, often displayed through media attention. The impacts and pressures are far greater once public attention is focused on the event or issue and the highly-coveted reputation and image of the company involved is threatened—resulting in a crisis. Stakeholders tend to rely on media coverage because information through the media is being perceived as more credible than direct communication (Bond & Kirshenbaum, 1998); however, as noted, direct communication now accompanies news stories related to a crisis.

As reputation and image are essential to a company or organization's success, the threats to the reputation and image due to a crisis are magnified by the dissemination of negative news or the sharing of negative perceptions (Tucker & Melewar, 2005). In addition, the information available to the public is readily accessible and permanent long after the crisis has subsided, suggesting that information retrieval during a newer, similar crisis is reinserted into the public domain through media framing. As such, a past crisis is or can be inextricably linked to a future crisis and serve as a reminder of an organization's past transgressions—even during a crisis that does not directly involve it.

When the Exxon *Valdez* grounded on the Bligh Reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound on March 24, 1989, media coverage of the environmental disaster was intense. The media's

portrayal of the *Valdez* story, like similar environmental catastrophes, often are framed toward confrontational dialogue and sensationalism rather than informing the public of various viewpoints that encourages objective evaluation (Anderson, 2002). Major unexpected events are routinely dealt with as exciting events in which drama dominates at the expense of information (Smith, 1992). In the case of Exxon, the graphic imagery of the damage done to the environment in the pristine Alaska coastline added to the media appeal and negative public perception of the company (Plumer, 2010). This graphic imagery, coupled with Exxon's inadequate communicative and ameliorative response, amplified the public's negative perception of Exxon and its reaction to the crisis. Exxon's slow response and poor crisis communication solidified the *Valdez* disaster into the academic and public crisis lore and "by the time the media was finished, the Exxon name was synonymous with environmental catastrophe" (Haddock, 2000, p. 11).

Smith's (1992) assessment of the media's coverage of the Exxon *Valdez* crisis offers insight into the linkages subsequent crises have with those of crisis past. By lacking scientific expertise or a familiarity with the complexities of crises, journalists and media organizations often produce a template for reporting on each crisis based on a general view of similar crises. In this context, it is therefore prudent for journalists and media figures to note high-profile historical crises when reporting on contemporary crises that have similar features or are of a similar nature. This suggests there is a perceptual linkage in the public consciousness between crises over time due to the media's portrayal of the present crisis in relation to prior events. While many in the public may forget or not consciously think about a particular crisis as time passes, media exposure and references to that past crisis remind individuals of that shared public experience. Furthermore, articles or other sources that mention old crises not only serve as a

reminder to many, they inform new generations of transgressions they may not have been aware of.

Crisis Recall

Much work has been done on how humans remember past events, imagine future events, and connect or recall past experiences with current events (Schacter, Addis, & Buckner, 2007; Schacter, Addis, & Buckner, 2008; Tulving, 1985; 2002). Trauma also can be applied collectively to entire groups of people and populations and differs from individual trauma in the sense that it is shared with others. These national traumas involve elements of fear, vulnerability and a loss of a sense of security and evoke collective senses of anger, loss, sadness, concern and other emotions attributed to the event (Neal, 1998). These events emotions may vary in degree due to an individual or populations proximate distance to the event or its impacts. Augé (2004) emphasizes the importance of "collective forgetting" and the need to forget in order to stay in the present. If, however, a crisis erupts that reminds the individual and the collective about prior crises—and reminds society of its vulnerability to current and future crises, organizations of crises past are inextricably linked to crises present. This is demonstrated in internet search results where past crises see a spike in references when a crisis of a similar nature occurs.

Memory recall of crises poses additional challenges for organizations that are facing a new crisis, as news stories remind media consumers of the past crises and transgressions of that organization. Extant crises also create problems for other organizations that earlier faced crises as the media often reminds consumers of the old crisis and often compare that crisis (and the organization's response) with the current one. One such consequence of these references to previous crises is the role of anger (Kottasz & Bennet, 2016). Anger is a salient emotion that presents challenges for communication managers of a company when dealing with a crisis

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(Coombs & Holladay 2007). This anger often is directed toward a company involved in a crisis when culpability for the crisis is attributed to them (Weiner, 2006).

Corporations with a bad reputation prior to the news story can be further damaged by their crisis response style (Payne, 2006); those with a history of crisis involvement are likely to be subjected to further scrutiny and anger once the public is reminded of their past wrongdoing. This underscores the need for a competent and consistent communication strategy by all key figures in the company when facing the media. Through the media, the company is often perceived to violate expectations as to how the organization should behave (Hearit, 2006). This amplifies the complexities a crisis produces, places pressure on the organization for resolution and further damages the highly-coveted and protected reputation a company has spent years if not decades cultivating. Therefore, misstatements, poor choices of words, or deviations from the official corporate crisis communication strategy by CEO's or other executives are especially detrimental to the management of the crisis by increasing the anger and negative perception of the public toward the company.

Media coverage during a crisis informs the public of various aspects of a crisis and the company or companies involved. The awareness of the public and stakeholders of a crisis increases the pressure on the company involved to resolve the crisis and the media influences the positive or negative perception of the public about the company and its management of the crisis. This perception impacts the reputation and image of that company which are highly-valued assets of an organization. The advent of the internet and social media has changed not only the ability of people to communicate, but also influences the media coverage of a crisis (Lee, Lancendorfer & Lee, 2005; Messner & Terilli, 2007). Information and opinions about a newsworthy event are now disseminated immediately and globally, increasing both the

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awareness of a crisis and the pressure on a company to resolve it. Official press releases and statements by top executives become part of the news and an important factor in shaping the public perception of the company.

Examining the amount of media coverage a crisis receives provides an evaluative gauge on the scope of dissemination of news allocated to a particular event. It also provides a resource in determining the level of public awareness certain crises receive and the public interest in a crisis, as measured through the number of news articles dedicated to the crisis. By examining media coverage over time (in years), researchers can gain insight into how long or with what intensity a crisis remains in the public consciousness and the trends associated with the coverage since the crisis began provide useful contexts as to a crisis' association with other events. Similar crises do not necessarily receive the same amount of media coverage. Evaluating the media attention of crises, such as the Exxon *Valdez*, *American Trader* and BP Gulf oil spill, provides a perspective as to why some crises of a similar nature receive media coverage and elicit public attention. This review may provide insight as to what characteristics, such as the communicative response by the organization, shape public perception and influence the framing of news articles covering the crisis.

Conclusion

As demonstrated by the review of the literature, the communication strategy employed by an organization during a crisis is an important determinant in the perception of the effectiveness of the crisis management response, protecting the company's image and reputation, and restoring social legitimacy between the company and public. What is needed in the crisis literature is a comparative analysis and evaluation of the planned apologia strategies employed by an organization involved in a crisis and the statements or public comments key executives say

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during the crisis. This will provide a more holistic evaluation of the overall effectiveness of a company's strategy during a crisis. In order to arrive at this type of analysis and evaluation, it is necessary to next detail the methodological steps to be taken in order to answer the research questions that guide this study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This dissertation will evaluate the 1989 Exxon *Valdez* and 2010 British Petroleum Gulf oil spill crises and will do so utilizing qualitative methods and case study analysis. Specifically, this chapter will first detail the use of case study approach, informed by Comparative Historical Analysis that codes specific statements by Exxon and BP chief executives and other public relations officials; and, second, offer a comparative analysis that examines time as a factor as it relates to the Exxon *Valdez, American Trader,* and BP Gulf oil spills. The purpose for doing so is to develop grounded theory and expand on existing work that can inform future crisis management scholarship and to determine how similar crises are connected over time through media references or recall.

Case Study Analysis

The appropriate methodology for this research and to address the research questions is to first utilize the case study method. The case study method allows for holistic analysis of real-life events (Yin, 2003). It is both an approach to research and as well as a vehicle that helps a researcher determine what to study (Patton, 2002; Sellnow, et al., 2009). Furthermore, a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (Yin, 1984). It is a useful research method for greater findings of relevance beyond and individual case and can be applied appropriately to an organization to improve its functioning (Fidel, 1984). Bromley (1990) states that a case study is a "systematic inquiry into an event or a set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest" (p. 302). As a research method, case studies seem to be appropriate for investigating phenomena when: (l) a large variety of factors and relationships are included; (2) no basic laws exist to determine which factors and relationships are important; and (3) when the

factors and relationships can be directly observed (Fidel, 1984). For crisis management

communication, the case study approach can identify best practices (and failures) because an

individual or organizational situation is identified, and in so doing, how it is defined and isolated

allows for a more complete understanding of how messages shape perceptions (Sellnow, et al.,

2009). By evaluating prominent examples, the case study method allows for a more narrowed

examination of particular elements within a crisis and for a comparative analysis between crises.

Comparative Historical Analysis (CHA)

A comparative historical analysis (CHA) of the 2010 Exxon's *Valdez* oil spill off the

coast of Alaska and BP's Gulf oil spill crisis of will be conducted. A CHA covers general

characteristics of research designs developed to answer research questions derived from

historical institutionalization and as a field of research characterized by the use of systematic

comparisons of processes over time to explain large-scale outcomes (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer,

2003; Mahoney, 2004; Rohlfing, 2013). A comparative analysis is an instrument that uses a

generic analytical approach that allows for cross-case analysis—one with a focus on the

complexities of the cases, as well as the interplay between components in order to tease out their

multiple relationships and causal connections (Kan et al., 2015; Miles & Huberman, 2003).

Often referred to as qualitative comparative analysis (QCA), this approach uses case studies that

allow for the identification of multiple causal pathways, as well as their interactions, in a manner

which is not possible through traditional statistical approaches (Ferriera et al., 2016). This will

be particularly useful when evaluating the communication responses of the organizations

involved in the selected crises.

Yin's (2003) replication logic provides a basis for selecting cases for comparison with an

initial case and can enhance a study's potential for making causal claims. His literal replication

involves comparing cases that are similar to each other, are from the same end of the theoretical spectrum, and could predict similar results (Gibbert et al., 2013; Nair & Gibbert, 2016; Yin, 2003). This is useful because comments by CEOs during a crisis often run contrary to the communication strategies used by companies during a crisis. For example, the next chapter will show how BP's Tony Hayward's comments during the crisis and the public criticism of BP's response strategy undercut BP's efforts at an ethical apology during the crisis (Diers-Lawson et al., 2013; Smithson et al., 2013; Diers-Lawson & Pang, 2016). Relatedly, one way to assess whether government and industry (at any level) learn from their disaster experience is to examine two similar events at different points in time (Sylves & Comfort, 2012). Exxon's then-CEO Lawrence Rawl's actions, inactions and communication during the Exxon *Valdez* crisis, for example, provide interesting and useful comparisons to Hayward's conduct during the BP Gulf oil spill crisis and raise questions as to why individuals and organizations repeat certain mistakes as well as commit new ones.

An Examination and Coding of Public Statements

Organizational communication effectiveness has been identified as a key component in determining the success or perceived success of an organization's management of a crisis (Benoit, 1995, 1997, 2006; Blythe, 2011; Coombs, 1999, 2006, 2012, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2002, 2009; Fearn-Banks, 1996; Hearit, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2001, 2006; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2011). As a result, the second step in my methodology is to review and code the public comments attributed to Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl and BP's Tony Hayward. Their respective statements will be examined using Hearit's (2004) crisis management through apologia approach with seven factors: denial, bolstering, differentiation, minimization,

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transcendence, corrective action and mortification in order to evaluate the impact their statements had on their organization's communication and management strategies. These "factors" will be used as codes and their statements will be labeled as such, depending on their characteristics. Benoit's (1995, 1997, 2004) image repair strategies will also be considered when evaluating the impact of planned corporate communication strategies and the subsequently unprepared or unplanned remarks of key executives.

The elasticity of Hearit's (2005) work on apologia is ideally suited for crisis management due to its interdisciplinary nature and its breadth in applicability among and across various sectors and organizations. Furthermore, the seven factors will allow for the coding of statements of corporate executives that were perceived to be attributable as statements of the organization itself. This allows for an examination as to whether the executives were presenting a defense with a "compelling counter description and situating the alleged organizational wrongdoing in a more favorable context" (Hearit, 1994, p. 115) or engaging in an apologetic (or counter intuitive) exchange or clash of views between the organization and stakeholders (Hearit, 2011). Hearit's work has been applied to organizations involved in prior crises and is oft-cited in the crisis communication and crisis management literature.

By examining the statements, comments and observable actions of the CEOs and executives during the two crises, I will evaluate the impact on the perception of the organization's management of the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spill crises using Hearit's apologia framework. I will then assess what characteristics are similar in the two cases and how or if their comments and public statements assisted in, influenced, or undermined the organizations' management and communication efforts.

Crisis Communication Strategies

As part of the content analysis of the organizational crisis communication strategies and the public statements attributed to key executives during the crises, I will determine whether the apologia strategies of Hearit and image repair strategies of Benoit are sufficient to capture the entire context of the communication present in these crises. Since media reports on these events include unprepared comments by company executives and much of the crisis communication literature and theory is rooted in formal strategies, further articulation of prior works may be necessary and may lead to new theory development in the form of an expansion of the existing work of others. An initial review of statements by Exxon executives during the *Valdez* crisis and comments made by BP CEO Tony Hayward suggest that current work on crisis communication strategies may not be sufficient to capture the full picture of crisis communication strategies utilized during a crisis. Both companies engaged in extensive public relations campaigns due the bad publicity surrounding the crisis as well as the poor communication that followed. These missteps increased the threats to their reputations as individuals form their perceptions based upon media reports—and it is very difficult for companies to change these first impressions (Sjovall & Talk, 2004). Effective crisis communication requires all members of an organization to adhere to the same strategy, a strategy that frames the media coverage and public perception of the event more favorably toward the organization. The impact of the comments made by executives should be considered and incorporated into an overall assessment of the companies' crisis communication strategies and their impact on the perception of the companies involved. Since building a "common operating picture" is essential for clear communication during a crisis (Comfort, 2007), an examination and evaluation of the entirety of communicative strategies

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employed during a crisis is also essential for researchers in understanding the effectiveness of companies' responses.

Time as a Factor

The time of occurrence of a crisis is significant as well as the time or period between similar crises (particularly related to organizational learning). This makes the second step in my method**,** a comparative analysis between the Exxon *Valdez,* the British Petroleum *American Trader* oil spill, and the BP Gulf oil spill, interesting and potentially enlightening. For example, Madsen & Desai (2010) suggest that knowledge depreciation and memory are conditions that contribute to organizational susceptibility regarding crises. This may also apply to the time lapse from the Exxon *Valdez* spill and BP Gulf oil as an explanation of why BP's Tony Hayward was not vigilant in ensuring his comments and actions did not magnify the already-existing animosity toward a company responsible for a major oil spill. However, it remains important to evaluate and review times or dates of occurrence as a possible explanatory factor (in addition to the nature of a crisis and magnitude) in the attention given to one crisis or another. Furthermore, why certain crises receive media attention and for how long is of interest in determining the length of impacts that crises have on organizations, particularly on their reputations.

The *American Trader* received far less attention than the Exxon *Valdez* and this requires additional scrutiny to explore the possible or likely reasons a smaller spill would receive a relatively free pass. It could be scale, fatigue, quality of response, or that attention remained predominately on the much larger, high-impact crisis. In addition, British Petroleum was generally praised for its conduct and reaction to the *American Trader* crisis which may suggest it had been better prepared for a spill or had learned valuable lessons and insights from Exxon's debacle in Alaska just a year prior. A subsequent crisis that shortly followed a highly-publicized

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one of a similar kind could have resulted in considerable media coverage and further scrutiny on the oil industry. However, the *American Trader* incident received far less coverage than the *Valdez*. This warrants further review as to potential reasons why one crisis consumes so much media attention while another evokes a much smaller amount.

Since the attention given to a particular crisis has significant impacts on an organization and its viability, and there exists a number of researchers who have varying views on crisis stages and phases, an examination of how time may influence when a crisis begins and ends as determined by media or other public exposure may yield interesting and important contributions to the crisis domain. It's akin to the "if a tree falls in a forest and no one hears it does it make a sound**?"** question thoughtfully raised by 18th Century philosopher George Berkeley. If a crisis occurs with little external media attention given to it, is it still a crisis? Stated another way, crises are mediated in their social construction and the public scrutiny bestowed on prominent and notable crises magnifies their impact and, often, their duration. Therefore, it is important to examine the mediated exposure and dissemination of a crisis over time and determine the "staying power" a crisis has in public awareness as demonstrated by media references once the immediate threats or damaged posed has subsided.

As case studies in crisis management and comparative analyses are largely retrospective endeavors, this dissertation will evaluate the media attention and references to the three crises examined in this study by using major search engines, such as *Google, Yahoo, Lexus Nexus*, and *Access World News* in order to calculate the number of references produced when searching "Exxon *Valdez*", "*American Trader,*" "BP Gulf oil spill," "Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader,*" "*American Trader* and BP Gulf oil spill," and "Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spill." The purpose is not only to establish exposure; it is also to examine whether a crisis ends when the

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attention during it or immediately after its eruption subsides or whether a prominent crisis lingers. It is also useful to examine a subsequent crisis like it (BP Gulf oil spill) and assumes its role as the new champion with an extended life expectancy. In the twenty years between the two giant oil spills, many others have occurred. However, considerable research has since emerged comparing the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil crisis and this comparison was evident in news reports as the BP Gulf oil crisis was developing. It may also provide insight into whether the communication strategies employed during the crisis by these companies impacts media narratives, public perception, or provide predictions as to whether the management and communication efforts during the crisis influence its staying power for future references. Further analysis may also shed light, using Exxon and the *American Trader* as reference points, as to whether smaller oil spills (or crises) are relatively ignored when occurring *simultaneously* or soon after a much larger one. This may also lead to answering Berkeley's philosophical question regarding human perception within a crisis context—perhaps the mediated construction of a crisis is muffled by time or overshadowed by larger crises occurring. Or perhaps the sound of failure during a contemporary crisis evokes memories of the sound of the proverbial tree falling from a previous one.

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Grounded Theory and Evaluation

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Grounded Theory

Finally, this research will take a classical grounded theory approach. Although researchers have expanded, diversified and modified grounded theory, much of the original conceptualization and application proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) at its inception are most suitable for this research. In particular, Glaser and Strauss contended that grounded theory represents a means of generating concepts and theory throughout the course of the research that

more closely mirror reality than traditional approaches. The emphasis that the generation of substantive theory and for "examining areas of social life not amenable to the techniques for collecting quantitative data" (p. 17) may result in the development of new theories, concepts and definitions useful to the expansive domain of crisis management.

Grounded theory implies some mechanisms that may improve practice while expanding academic research into areas, particularly those of an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary nature. The development of new theories that can expand our knowledge of crises and assist in their management and amelioration is useful to researchers and practitioners and is appealing to many who use it as a method or approach to research (Babchuck, 2009). Of relevance is the use of variations of grounded theory in fields such as communication in order to further our understanding of messages and the construction of perceived reality (Mills, 2006). These applications may yield interesting and useful results when analyzing and evaluating the communication strategies and performance of a CEO, such as Tony Hayward, and the relationship between a CEO's communication during a crisis and the communication narrative set forth by the company or organization through its public relations function. Theory development and articulation accompanied by existing bodies of knowledge can, and should be, of primary interest for researchers seeking to contribute to the domain of understanding crisis phenomena. A more robust content analysis can provide conclusions about the communicator, the message, and the situation surrounding its creation and derive analytical constructs built upon existing theories and research (Krippendorff, 2004). This dissertation seeks such contributions by applying previous work on crisis communication to additional public communication during a crisis.

Evaluation

The "special nature" of evaluation lies in how it selects and synthesizes contributions from across disciplines into an overall perspective (Scriven, 1991, p. 153). While the crisis literature contains significant amounts of quantitative research, a qualitative approach often produces the most robust evaluation depending on the area of focus. The interdisciplinary nature of evaluation research and its utilization of various methodologies and approaches to determine the significance of something yield interesting reflections and interpretations that may result in meaningful scholarly contributions. An evaluative approach is less reliant on hypothesis testing as are other disciplines, rather it seeks to focus on merit, worth or significance of something where measurement is often most concerned with descriptive properties—which is what I will do within the context of crisis management (Scriven, 1991, p.139).

Last, learning lessons from prior experiences and instituting changes in organizational processes, policies or procedures and applying these lessons is an evaluative function. This involves using historical analyses from case studies that can improve organizational and individual preparation for and responses to a crisis. Formative evaluations focus on improvement and can, and should be, a continuous process (Scriven, 1991). While the literature on organizational learning is extensive, a focus on the communicative practices utilizing evaluation approaches is useful since almost everything falls under the domain of public relations during a crisis (Roach, 2011). And since CEOs are essential in determining the success or failure of public relations outcomes during a crisis (Harris, 1991) the need for top executives to learn from previous mistakes of others and remain focused not only on managing the crisis but maintaining an effective crisis communication response becomes crucial. Since a person's words are a reflection of their inner state of mind (McGannon & Mauws, 2000), evaluating the

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comments and conducts of CEOs during a crisis may also encourage practitioners and researchers in organizational psychology, management and crisis planning further incentive to change the mindset of top executives toward greater awareness and crisis preparation.

Evaluation's interdisciplinary nature can encompass the theoretical approaches of the various contributors to the crisis domain as well as examining the many facets, complexities and intricacies associated with organizational crises. Evaluation is not as reliant on hypothesis testing as it is in determining what an evaluand does, is or should do. This makes evaluation research an ideal methodological and application approach for the crisis domain and should provide the impetus for greater contributions from this developing research field.

Having reviewed the use of a case study approach in an effort to uncover the rhetorical strategies used by crisis managers as well as detailing how I will study and account for the role of time with regards to references to previous crises, the next chapter will detail the analysis undertaken in an effort to complete this study.

CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

The Nature of Crisis Response

Over time, the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill has become a "what not to do" example in crisis management, with many authors contrasting Exxon's ineffective communication strategy with the successful strategy employed by Johnson & Johnson during the 1982 Tylenol poisoning crisis (e.g. Benoit, 1997; Black, 2005; Freeman, 2006; Kaufman et al., 1994; Mehta & Xavier, 2012; Otto, 1997; Paul & Hutchison, 2005; Sperry, 1995; Stone, 2003; Swanston, 1993). Exxon's public statements by officials angered the public, political figures and provided media with a corporate villain to present to their audiences as examples of corporate excess, arrogance and indifference to a crisis that they were attributed as responsible for. CEO Lawrence Rawl and other executives' comments only added to the negative perception of Exxon during the crisis and damaged their reputation and that of the industry for decades. The spill and Exxon's handling of the incident continue to be part of the American lexicon as evidenced by a recent sports article which referenced the *Valdez* disaster comparatively regarding a debacle in how one university has conducted its search for a new head coach (Forde, 2017).

The Exxon *Valdez* and the management of and communication during the crisis by Exxon officials became a poster child for failed crisis planning and crisis communication for over two decades. At the time, oft-contrasted with the Exxon *Valdez* spill was the *American Trader* oil spill, which occurred when the tanker ran over its anchor off the coast of Huntington Beach, California, on February 7, 1990, causing a spill of 416,598 gallons of crude into the ocean. The lessor of the *American Trader*, British Petroleum—which would come to be known as BP (in 2000)—was lauded for its quick and environmentally sensitive response to the accident. Yet over time, the comparison to the Exxon *Valdez* that came to be dominant, given the size and

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magnitude, was that of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. While Exxon's despoiling of a pristine wilderness area was terrible, it paled in comparison to that of BP's disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 – in which 4.9 million barrels of oil gushed out of damaged well for 6 months. Indeed, almost immediately, stories started to compare BP's efforts in the Gulf to those of Exxon in Prince William Sound in 1989 (e.g. Choi, 2912; Haycox, 2010; O'Connor, 2011; Sylves & Comfort, 2012; Wickman, 2010). Given this size, duration, and the fact that together they have become a template for what not to do in a crisis, this dissertation has engaged in analysis of these two crises, treating them as an analog. As a result, to explicate this study, in Chapter I this dissertation posed the following two research questions:

R_1:   What was the substance of the communication response of Exxon and BP after their respective crises?

R_2:   What is the relationship between crises similar in nature separated by time?

To answer the first research question, I first review and explicate the message strategies used by Exxon and then BP. Second, I compare and contrast the strategies use by both companies to determine similarities, differences, or characteristics important for examination and evaluation. To answer the second research question, I perform a content analysis by which I identify the media coverage generated by these two stories and draw conclusions about how the media coverage framed understanding and interpretations of the crises.

With regards to the message strategies used by these crisis managers, I categorize the controversial statements using a scheme developed by Hearit's (1994, 1995, 1999, 2004, 2006) responses to allegations of guilt, Benoit's (1995, 1997, 1999, 2004) image restoration strategies and Coombs' organizational defense and Situational Crisis Communication (SCCT) strategies

(1999, 2002; Coombs and Holladay 2002, 2004). These scholars are key contributors to the apologia and crisis communication literature and their work has been applied to various crises. They provide the means for an analysis of Exxon's and BP's statements during their respective crises and have been applied to various other crisis case studies.

After a review of Exxon's and BP's comments along with statements and circumstances with other crises (e.g. the Sago Mines tragedy, Bridgestone/Firestone tread separation crisis, Toyota acceleration crisis), I developed six additional strategies that provide a more robust and accurate analysis. This is necessary as they encompass comments during a crisis that are not part of an intentional or planned crisis communication strategy implemented by a company or organization. These additions provide greater applicability to other crises and allow for a thorough, more holistic understanding of an organization's crisis communication. The addition expands the scope of crisis communication examination by incorporating all public and/or leaked communication, supplementing the useful work of Hearit, Benoit, Coombs and Holladay more oriented toward a planned crisis communication strategy. The six strategies added to the amalgamated list produced by noted scholars in crisis are: *unity of purpose, compensation, admission*, *shared responsibility, self-pity* and *silence.* These strategies represent both conscious and intentional communication strategies as well as unintentional or ill-suited strategies or statements employed by the company or key figures within it. Table 1 shows the amalgamated strategies used by organizations and executives during a crisis used in this analysis and evaluation: Table 1. Apologia Strategies

Denial:	The organization claims it "didn't do it" or are not responsible for the crisis. This may also include a rejection of certain aspects of the crisis that may or not be true.

Scapegoating:	Attempting to place responsibility or blame solely or partially on another entity or individual which may or may not be justified.
Bolstering/ Self- Adulation:	The response is emphasizing the company's positive traits or promote actions or initiatives that may or may not be directly related to the crisis or mitigation efforts.
Differentiation:	There is an admittance of some degree of responsibility by it does not reflect "who we are." It may also be used to focus on certain features of the crisis or response, change or deflect attention or to promote the company's perception of their management of the crisis.
Minimization:	The issue or crisis is not as bad as perceived or the organization's responsibility is minimal.
Transcendence:	An admission of the act but claim they are following a higher law or purpose.
Corrective Action:	Presenting the steps taken to resolve the crisis and "make things right."
Admission:	The company admits or assumes responsibility for the cause and impacts of the crisis and for its mitigation even if they perceived it to be not entirely their fault or that others are to blame. It may also involve some acknowledgment of 'facts' during a crisis.
Mortification:	Apologizing for the act and the impacts of the crisis.

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Compensation:	The company offers to pay for the damages caused by the crisis.
Unity of Purpose:	The company or organization shares the crisis with the public and other stakeholders with a common commitment toward resolution.
Shared Responsibility:	The company admits some degree of culpability for the crisis and/or its resolution but suggests others do as well. This may involve shifting the blame or a share of it to others.
Self-Pity:	A company, or its leaders presents, itself as a victim of the crisis rather than the primary cause of or contributor to it.
Silence:	The company or its leaders fail to respond, comment, or provide media access in a timely fashion after the crisis begins.

Table 1. This table represents the different apologia used during this analysis.

In applying this schema to Exxon, I will select comments from Exxon executives during the first five weeks of the crisis. Five weeks were used as a parameter since, unlike the BP Gulf oil spill which could have gushed for many months, only a finite amount of oil could result from the Exxon *Valdez* tanker (Fountain, 2015) and by April 30, significant progress had been made in containing and beginning efforts to remove the oil were underway. The comments were selected after a review of several media sources (e.g. Holusha, 1989, *Houston Chronicle*, *Miami Herald*, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, *San Jose Mercury News, Tampa Bay Times, Times Union*, etc.) and

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published scholarly work (e.g. Fearn-Banks, 1996, 2002; Hearit, 1995; 2006; Hill, 1990; O'Connor, 2012; Paul & Hutchison, 2005, etc.). Second, I will categorize the statements of Exxon executives during the Exxon *Valdez* crisis using the aforementioned schema. Exxon news releases will not be included in the analysis as their advertising campaign overshadowed their releases and were an attempt to influence the perception of Exxon following the comments by Exxon executives and the criticism Exxon received for its response to the crisis.

With regards to BP, I will select BP CEO Tony Hayward's most reported comments. The comments were selected after a review of several media sources (e.g. *BBC*, 2010a; *BBC*, Dodd, 2010; McClam & Weber, 2010; 2010b; Raedle, 2010; Scudder, 2010; Somaiya, 2010; Walsh, 2010; Wray, 2010). Seven of these statements attributed to Tony Hayward during the BP gulf oil spill crisis often are noted—and included in the analysis is a comment by BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg and media pictures of Tony Hayward's infamous yacht sailing trip during aftermath of the spill. Hayward's yachting trip was included because it followed his highly-criticized comments and because it was also heavily criticized by the media and government officials, such as White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel (Wray, 2010). The intersection of politics and disasters results in the publics' attribution of responsibility (Arcenauz & Stein, 2006; Debbage et al., 2014), and results in attempts by political figures to attempt to influence media coverage of the event to their advantage (Bright & Bagley, 2017). The publics' inclusion of the Obama Administration's lack of an effective response to the BP Gulf oil spill along with negative media coverage of BP (Pew Research Center, 2010) produced a political imperative for the President and his administration to add to the criticism of BP and re-focus blame and attribution on BP. Tony Hayward's comments provided continual opportunities for public

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officials, pundits and the media to concentrate their attention and their criticism on BP, further influencing the negative public perception of BP and its reputation.

Last, BP's official news releases for the three days prior to the comments also are examined using the same criteria and strategies for identification. This will allow for a comparative analysis of the official strategies employed by BP's crisis communication and public relations team and the messages or narratives they were trying to convey to influence the public's perception of their handling of the crisis (Retrieved from BP's media page at http://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/media/press-releases.html). The results then will be analyzed to evaluate whether Hayward's comments, Svanberg's comment, and the oft-referenced picture of Hayward's yachting excursion followed the official strategy of the company, deviated from the strategy or undermined the strategy that the corporation was attempting to promote to the public via the media.

A Tale of Two Crises, Separated by Time: Exxon and BP

Exxon's Crisis Communication Strategies

Soon after the Exxon *Valdez* ran aground on March 24, 1989, media coverage expanded from local reporting to an international story. To many, it soon became clear that Exxon had not planned for shore cleanup and the task was much more difficult than the company envisioned (Haycox, 2012). Exxon appeared to be unprepared for such a spill and even less prepared to communicate effectively during the crisis. The company had neither a communication plan nor a communication team in place to handle the event (Pauly & Hutchison, 2005). Further complicating its efforts was the decision to have its media response center in Valdez, Alaska, a location too small and too remote to accommodate the national and international media and maintain more effective control of the messaging by Exxon. Exxon's use of multiple spokespeople added to an array of messages, with some obviously unprepared for technical

questions by reporters or having sufficient information to be of value to the public or to demonstrate Exxon's competence at managing the crisis (Fearn-Banks, 1996). The lack of a clear or consistent communication strategy, conflicting or inaccurate information, and the use of many Exxon executives and employees as spokespersons during various times further angered the public and fed the negative media narrative. Most importantly from an apologia strategy, CEO Lawrence Rawl's inept public response resulted in the Exxon *Valdez* crisis as an oft-cited and prominent example of an organizational failure in crisis communication.

Early statements by Exxon foreshadowed the public relations nightmare to come. Top Exxon executives declined to comment for almost a week after the spill (Halusha, 1989). Silence at the onset of a crisis is ill-advised and undermines credibility. However, mixed messages, obfuscation, allocating blame, or denial also would come to represent Exxon's defensive and reactionary crisis communication efforts. Exxon also underestimated or understated the severity of the crisis. Spokesman David Parrish was quoted in *The New York Tim*es on March 29th saying that the company did not expect major environmental damage as a result of the spill and that Exxon's experts were on route to the site to relieve Alyeska Pipeline workers handling the spill (Shabecoff, 1989). This *minimization* early in the crisis, while promising *corrective action*, laid the foundation for the lack of trust the public and the media would have in Exxon as information continuously contradicted its public statements. In fact, just four days later Exxon admitted that their initial containment efforts had been unsuccessful and that the environmental damage would likely be severe. This form of *admission* as a strategy may have been forced due to the assessments by government officials, experts and the media and as a protective measure for its reputation (trust) once contrary evidence was presented.

However, Exxon never fully accepted responsibility (Williams & Treadway, 1992). The optics of the spill and its impacts on those affected began a media frenzy. Exxon's defensive posture and a perceived failure to recognize the totality of the damage the spill inflicted were magnified by the vocal criticism of residents and fisherman who expressed their frustration by shouting at Exxon executives and spokespersons at various appearances throughout the crisis. Exxon continued to appear to be most concerned with the financial impact the spill would have on its company rather than protecting its reputation and concern for its workers or those affected (Fearn-Banks, 2002). As Hearit (1995) notes, executives have a legal responsibility to their shareholders and not stakeholders and this obligation poses conflicts and potential contradictions during a crisis. Executives' initial reactions are often to protect the organization. Yet, by failing to recognize the significant of the event and its impacts, this instinctive posture of self-preservation often results in greater long-term damage for the company.

Exxon's communication during the Valdez crisis also has been described as subjected to legal rather than public relations advice, blaming others, corporate arrogance and pseudo apologies (Jaques, 2008; Mitroff & Pauchant, 1990; Tyler, 1997). The multitude of voices and mixed, confusing statements by Exxon officials during the crisis increased public anger, and cohesive messages were as elusive as was a primary voice for the company. The visual imagery of the damage and criticism by government officials and residents on Exxon's slow and ineffective response should have convinced Exxon early on it was mismanaging the communicative aspects of the crisis as well as the actual response efforts. Exxon continued to appear to not recognize or appreciate the sustained damage its own lagging response and poor communication was inflicting on itself and the crisis. This may have increased the focus and the

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blame on Exxon for the crisis rather than a public recognition of systemic failures of planning and regulation within the industry and by various government entities.

Almost immediately, federal investigators were sent to the scene to investigate the cause of the incident and to test Captain Joseph Hazlewood and other officers of the vessel for drugs and alcohol. For the next few days, the media also focused on Hazlewood as the culprit, prodded by Exxon officials. Brian Dunphy, a spokesman for Exxon Shipping, suggested that the captain violated the ship owner's rules by yielding control of the vessel to his third mate, who was not authorized to operate the vessel, at the time it ran aground. "The captain should have been at the bridge," stated Dunphy (Lange, 1989). This deflection or transference of responsibility is a form of *denial* by blaming an individual within the organization and *differentiation* and *shared responsibility* since they must have been cognizant that some criticism for the captain's decisions would be a reflection on their hiring and personnel evaluation policies. Hazlewood's level of sobriety during the time of the incident has never been conclusively determined and the ship's crew suggested he was sober (*Sun Sentinel*, 1989, April 12).

Hazelwood did admit to drinking before boarding the vessel and urine samples taken nine hours later suggested he was drunk; however, some suggest he may have drank more after the ship ran aground (*Charlotte Observer*, 1989, April 4). Regardless, Exxon clearly had decided to shift the blame away from the company and on to an individual's actions, perhaps attempting to suggest that the company, too, was a victim in this crisis. Exxon's Shipping company repeatedly cited Hazlewood's drunkenness as a kind of human error that no management policy or safety guidelines could overcome (*Sun Sentinel*, 1989, April 12). In fact, almost exactly a year after the *Exxon Valdez* ran aground, Captain Hazlewood was acquitted by a jury of operating the vessel while intoxicated and instead convicted of a single charge of misdemeanor negligence (*New York*

Times, March 23, 1990). Exxon also place initial responsibility for the slow response on Alyeska Pipeline Service Co., the terminal operator. Exxon also noted that it was dumping special dispersants on the slick and taking *corrective action*. The attempts at deflection (*differentiation*) while promoting corrective action was an interesting and, arguably, somewhat effective strategy. Continued communicative and response strategies that followed, however, would return the scrutiny and blame back onto the company. This became particularly acute when Exxon engaged in a dispute with federal government officials regarding the delay in applying the dispersants and to their effectiveness.

Early in the crisis on March 29, the president of Exxon Shipping Company, Frank Iarossi, said Exxon was doing exactly what it should be doing by mobilizing experts and equipment from around the world. However, residents and officials complained that Exxon, Alyeska and the federal government had done little to contain the oil or clean up beyond the containment. Containment booms sat idle at the terminal, despite assurances from Iarossi (located in Houston) and Alyeska (Campbell, 1989). At the same time David Parrish was presenting a strategy of *minimization*, Iarossi and Exxon spokesman Tom Cirigliano presented *corrective actions* taken by Exxon. However, these statements appeared to residents, local news reporters, and other news outlets more like false assurances (e.g. "Valdez Officials React Slowly to Disaster", *Anchorage Daily News;* "Alaska Spill Cleanup Under Fire As Too Slow," *Akron Beacon Journal*) and that most of the responses so far by industry officials had been 'invisible' (Campbell, 1989). Government officials, such as Alaska's Department of Environmental Conservation commissioner Dennis Kelso, were quoted in media articles also criticizing Exxon's slow response to the spill and their failure to promptly marshal enough of the resources (skimmers) that were available to Exxon and Ayleska. Iarossi told *The New York Times* he could

not explain the delays, again presenting either ignorance or knowingly disseminating false information. This lack of awareness, adequate information or failed 'spin' undermined Exxon's credibility from the onset of the crisis.

At the March 29th news conference, Iarossi and Exxon's Alaska coordinator Don Cornett were "verbally slaughtered" for being unprepared at a press conference. Exxon Shipping's Brian Dunphy separately refused to verify the extent of the damage or what was being done about it, another episode not well-received by reporters (Fearn-Banks, 1996). These exchanges demonstrated incompetence and *silence* (or avoidance), further eroding confidence in Exxon's management of the crisis and damaging its reputation. Cornett, was forced to acknowledge that Exxon would never be able to clean up the 11 million-gallon spill. "When you spill 240,000 barrels, you don't ever expect to pick it up," he said (*Miami Herald*, 1989, March 30). This *admission* further aggravated the negative perceptions of local residents, government officials, environmentalists and other stakeholders and would add to the confusion as to what Exxon's plan for restoring this prized natural setting actually was.

The skepticism over Exxon's intentions on the spill cleanup and for paying for economic damages continued to anger Alaskans and government officials. This cynical view of Exxon was amplified by Exxon's statements. While announcing in early April of 1989 that Exxon had deposited $10 million in an Alaskan bank to be available to local residents whose businesses had been damaged by the spill and admitting liability to pay *'reasonable'* claims, local officials complained to the media that Exxon had been pressuring local citizens to quickly settle claims against the company (*St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 1989, April 2). The use of the term "reasonable" suggests ambiguity as to exactly what damages and to whom they would be paid—and that claims would be subjected to Exxon's judgement and scrutiny. The use of *admission* and

compensation as communication strategies suggests Exxon realized its perceived culpability in the crisis. However, they appeared to reserve the right to determine what their financial exposure to the economic damage was. This form of *differentiation* amplified the perception that Exxon was refusing to accept responsibility for the crisis but rather trying to minimize their legal and financial exposure.

Recognizing that the Exxon *Valdez* spill was fast becoming a public relations nightmare, the company embarked on a damage-control campaign by placing advertisements in newspapers throughout the United States. In an advertisement released on April 3 in 166 newspapers and magazines, Exxon Chairman Lawrence Rawl is quoted as saying "I want to tell you how sorry I am that this accident took place" (*Charlotte Observer*, 1989, p. 4; Zielenziger, 1989). While accepting responsibility to a degree, Exxon continued to shift the blame to others. Exxon President Lee Raymond said that his company would have reacted sooner but was prevented in acting by government officials, a statement contradicted by Alaskan Governor Steve Cowper on the same national program. Similarly, Rawl, appearing on another nationally-aired program, stated that the dispersants used by Exxon worked well in tests. However, U.S. Transportation Secretary Samuel Skinner, appearing on the same show, contradicted Rawl and stated the chemicals Exxon sough to use did not work well in tests. While suggesting it was implementing strategies of *compensation*, *admission*, *shared responsibility* and *mortification*, Exxon was actually attempting to assuage its guilt and shift responsibility for the costs and cleanup to others.

Exxon continued to bring significant criticism on itself along with considerable doubts over its willingness to accept responsibility for the spill and the cleanup. Local residents and others suggested that Exxon would rather pay the fines, which would be cheaper than to pay the cost of the cleanup, and oil-spill experts also suggested that Exxon used dispersants rather than

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the containment systems, which would have been more time-consuming and costly (Zielenziger, 1989).   While Iarossi was publicly stating that: "We do not intend to leave until the job is done . . . we intend to leave Prince William Sound close to what it was before the tragedy," state and local officials were highly critical of Exxon's cleanup efforts, describing their efforts to scrub beaches as dismal and ineffective and the amount of shoreline damages was growing daily (*Charlotte Observer*, 1989). Touting successes and efforts that were contradicted by officials and visual images of the increasing damage by media sources continued to erode at public confidence and trust in Exxon.

Exxon's bad publicity only got worse. Appearing before Congressional Committees on April 7, 1989, Exxon officials were forced to explain the slow reaction to the spill and cleanup efforts. Exxon one again blamed the federal government, suggesting the Coast Guard told it not to use booms immediately after the spills, a claim supported by Terminal Superintendent Chuck O'Donnell. Exxon also stated that deploying booms could result in an explosion, hazards that federal and state scientists in Valdez said did not exist (McAllister & Peterson, 1989). Rawl also suggested that the spill could have been broken up by using dispersants the morning of the spill but was prevented in doing so by dithering authorities (Buchan, 1989). Again, this position was contradicted by state and federal officials. Alaskan Governor Steve Copwer, frustrated by Exxon's slow response, requested that the U.S. Coast Guard take primary responsibility for the cleanup, a message sent directly to President George H.W. Bush by Alaska's Congressional delegation. In addition to promoting strategies of *compensation* and *corrective action*, Exxon utilized *shared responsibility* and *unity of purpose* but, once again, couched in the guise of allocating blame elsewhere (*differentiation, denial*). And, while there was plenty of blame to go

around, Exxon's perceived lack of accepting responsibility for the spill and the cleanup continued to erode confidence in the company and undermined its social legitimacy.

This strategy of adding qualifiers to strategies such as *compensation* and *corrective action* continued with Rawl's testimony before Congress on April 7, 1989. While apologizing for a second time and reiterating that the company would "in good conscience" pay to "fix" the problems the spill caused, Rawl suggested that this commitment was not limitless: "I cannot accept liability ad infinitum where it goes in the world" (Clayton, 1989). He further suggested that the federal government need to step up its financial contributions as a matter of its function. "All of us pay the U.S. government all the time" in taxes, he said. "A lot of these are government services that are supposed to be provided when you have a disaster" (*Times Union*, 1989). Two days later, U.S. Senator Harry Reid said he would introduce bills repealing the ability for oil companies to deduct expenses for cleaning oil spill and said: "Exxon's checkbook was never really opened in the first place" (McKinney, 1989). During the hearing, Rawl also acknowledged that putting Captain Hazlewood "back on the ship" was bad judgement, continuing the company's efforts to place primary blame on the flawed captain, but having to accept some responsibility for his employment (*differentiation*). As in previous Exxon statements that added qualifications, Rawl undermined attempts at image repair by limiting the company's responsibility for the environmental and economic restoration it had caused. His strategy of *compensation*, *admission*, *mortification*, and *unity of purpose* was limited by his over-extension of *shared responsibility* during the testimony.

Following the hearing, Exxon employed a crisis communication strategy (at least temporarily) of *corrective action* and *bolstering*. At a press conference on April 8, Exxon officials attempted to tout the company's efforts and frame its response as effective. Exxon

Senior Vice President Ulyesse LaGrange heralded "a job well-done in the most difficult circumstances" (Berliner, 1989). Pressed by reporters as to whether Exxon should feel embarrassed or ashamed at the inability to promptly and effectively respond to the crisis, Frank Iarossi replied "absolutely not," and he and LaGrange denied charges by state officials and the public that Exxon had done little to clean up the spill (Berlinger, 1989). Don Cornett highlighted the successful defense of fish hatcheries and the unloading of 42 million gallons of oil from the damaged tanker. Cornett also noted the difficult if not impossible task the company faced along with the progress it was making with the best equipment in the world. Iarossi also stated that he had no idea what he would do with the troops that President Bush had sent. Rather than promoting a sense of *unity of purpose* and *shared responsibility*, Iarossi was foreshadowing the continuation of assessing blame for the ineffective response to the U.S government and presenting self-confidence in Exxon, a view not shared by external observers.

The number of public voices emanating from Exxon confounded any clarity of a cohesive strategy. While *denial*, *shared responsibility* and *bolstering* often were intertwined with leveling blame at others, *compensation*, *mortification* and *corrective action* also appeared to have their limitations. Don Cornett was a visible figure during these times and his Kentucky drawl and unrattled manner made him an effective spokesman during the crisis (Dietrich, 1989). Cornett appears to have realized the importance of implementing an effective crisis communication strategy. "Credibility is everything," Cornett stated during an interview with the *Seattle Times* on April 11. After the press conference debacle Cornett endured with Iarossi and frustrated by their lack of having adequate information, he took members of the media in a helicopter to show them Exxon did indeed have a lot of equipment working on containing and cleaning up the oil spill. Cornett also projected sincerity in Exxon's acceptance of responsibility for the *Valdez*

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grounding. The spill "shouldn't have happened," he acknowledged. His strategies of *admission*, *mortification* and *corrective action* portrayed the emotive context others, particularly CEO Rawl, failed to convey. In the same interview, Cornett reiterated Exxon's promise to compensate all those impacted by the spill and pledged to clean up the beaches. "We're going to take care of these people." (Dietrich, 1989a). This acceptance of responsibility without conditions or limitations can be effective at restoring a corporation's image and social legitimacy. However, if the CEO of the company provides a more limited or measured rhetorical commitment, a subordinate's comments cannot be taken as solid assurances.

While continuing to provide information of *corrective action* and *compensation*, Exxon also continued its reactive and defensive posture for the next couple of weeks. Exxon claimed in April that "natural action" had cleaned up much of the spill in addition to Exxon's efforts (Wald, 1989a). Scientists and environmentalists strongly questioned Exxon's assessment that natural deterioration occurred so quickly or reduced the environmental threats. Criticism continued to mount at Exxon's ineffective response and failure to have adequate equipment and personnel necessary to clean up the spill and its still-slow response (Ward, 1989b). Exxon's failures to provide continuous updates with verified information or correcting past claims that were inaccurate or different than those provided by official government added to the public distrust. Instead, Exxon would choose to publicly disagree and argue with prominent government and political officials, debates that appeared frequently and publicly in the media. The company's April 3 advertising blitz that attempted to demonstrate to the public that it was sorry and aware of the damage caused was also criticized for failing to recognize the full scope of the catastrophe. While the town of Valdez was mentioned in the apology, other towns and villages were not. On April 9, the *Anchorage Daily News* reported that local officials in Cordova hired public relations

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experts, fearing their city was being forgotten. City Manager Don Moore complained about Exxon leaving Cordova out of their advertisements and city officials and local residents told reporters that Cordova was harder hit than Valdez (Wohlforth, 1989a).

Conflicting information provided by Exxon and government officials also evoked anger and confusion and undermined Exxon's credibility. The *Seattle Times* reported on April 9 that, while Exxon announced it was removing nearly 100,000 gallons of oil per day, government sources stated the amount was less than half of what Exxon suggested (Dietrich, 1989b; Fearn-Banks, 1996). Contradictions, inaccuracies or perceived hypocrisy damages the corporate reputation and the public's attitude toward those responsible for the crisis (Shim & Yang, 2016). Numbers produced regarding the amount of oil spilled collected and naturally absorbed were strongly contradicted by government officials. "I think almost no one takes them seriously except the press," said Oceanographer Jerry Galt of the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (Wholforth, 1989).

While promoting its cleanup efforts, Exxon employed several figures such as K.T. Koone, senior Exxon USA vice president, to highlight its successes on the ground. However, other Exxon officials, such as Hugh Brown, were unable or unwilling to discuss Koone's cleanup and evaporation numbers. Brown, instead, said that ". . . I'm pretty sure the public relations people are going to come up with a statement on it." Exxon's public relations department was unable to provide information on the subject soon after Koone promoted Exxon's success (Wholforth, 1989). The inability of Exxon's public relations team to verify prepared statements by a key official for Exxon demonstrated the unsupported, disjoined, and conflicted messaging and public relations strategies employed by Exxon during the crisis. Exxon's contradictions and

failure to have an integrated and coordinated crisis communication strategy continued to leave the company vulnerable to criticism by government officials and the media.

Exxon's failures in managing the spill and the cleanup resulted in additional impact on others as newspapers around the U.S. informed their readers that Exxon showed that the oil and gas industry was unprepared for such spills, implying that their readers could also be victims of a similar crisis. On April 9, regional newspapers such as *Press of Atlantic City*, *Richmond Times-Dispatch, St. Paul Pioneer Press* (Minnesota), *St. Petersburg Times* printed articles discussing the oil industry and government's failure to adequately plan and prepare for oils and their inability to respond, citing Exxon as the example. Others, such as the *Sacramento Bee*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *Sun-Sentinel* in Ft. Lauderdale ran articles that discussed how the Exxon *Valdez* spill had resulted in a twenty-cent increase in gas prices and the negative effects the spill and slow cleanup efforts were having on other industries, such as cruise ships and fisheries.

News outlets appeared to personalize the Alaskan tragedy to their more localized readership. Articles on the lack of planning for oil spills and the company's inability to respond quickly were suggesting that everyone could be susceptible to such a tragedy and reminded readers of local environmental issues (e.g. *Daily Breeze*, Torrance California, April 17, 1989; *Dallas Morning News*, April 13, 1989; *Miami Herald*, April 17, 1989) while also reporting on the spill itself. The reaction to the spill was world-wide. The *Financial Times* of London reported on April 12, 1989, that British officials were reviewing their pollution control measures for the North Sea. News reports on related, linked and ancillary issues associated with potential environmental disasters and subsequent impacts demonstrated the reach that the *Valdez* and Exxon's response to the crisis had globally. Media reports were also a harbinger of how the

Exxon *Valdez* was becoming a prominent example of crisis mismanagement, a distinction that would follow Exxon for decades.

The next couple of weeks that followed Rawl's April 7th Congressional testimony and the press conference held by Exxon executives on April 8th resulted in some more positive news for Exxon, mixed in with continued criticism. On April 13, the *Associated Press* issued a story in which the Coast Guard had announced that rough seas and high wind had broken up much of the spill from the Exxon *Valdez*. The same day, the *Anchorage Daily News* ran a front-page story with the headline "Critics Quiet Down as Exxon Pays Bills." Several newspapers, such as the *Houston Chronicle*, and *Miami Herald*, reported President Bush's admission that the federal government had failed in its planning and response efforts and would learn from the mistakes made during the Exxon *Valdez*. Reporters and critics also suggested that the American consumer was ultimately responsible for the tragedy due to their reliance on and consumption of petroleum-based fuel (Beker, 1989).

Competing news frames may have been influenced by Exxon's continued strategy of deflection and transference of the blame or much of it to others. However, the few more favorable articles did not overcome the negative stories regarding the spill and Exxon's culpability. Stories continued over rising gas prices and the resulting public anger, public protests and calls for boycotts, continued coverage on the environmental damage, and Exxon's refusal of a government request to fund a long-term assessment of the environmental damage caused by the spill. Newspapers such as the *Seattle Post-Intelligence* (April 13) ran these competing frames in the same edition, with one article touting positive aspects of Exxon's response or the on the spill and another presenting a more negative narrative. The *Houston Chronicle* ran two stories on the same page on April 17, 1989. One article ("Exxon tests steam

cleanup methods) discussed tests conducted on Exxon's cleanup (*corrective action*) while another ("Exxon's cleanup plan is scrutinized") was negative toward Exxon's response plan. Both articles included comments by federal and local officials along with residents who criticized Exxon's response to the spill. The same day, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* also ran several articles with updates and information on the spill along with a call for environmental protection ("Protect our arctic wilderness", April 17, 1989).

The majority of coverage remained negative and highly critical of Exxon and its response to the spill. The *Anchorage Daily News* provided continuous local coverage, often devoting several pages to the spill. Most were critical of Exxon, including articles that discussed the more technical aspects of the response. In the opinion section of their April 25th edition, the News stated: "Perhaps the most astonishing of all is the post spill response . . ." was of the suggestion by Alyeska Pipeline Service Co that the oil spill contingency plan employed was followed precisely and that they responded "exactly how we're supposed to do it" (1989, D6). The editorial continued by stating that, if oil companies had not learned from the Exxon *Valdez* disaster, state residents must demand that elected officials stand up to the oil industry whom they accused of putting aside public interests "when it conflicts with profit" (D6).

The negative coverage of Exxon's response to the spill was by no means limited to local residents and news coverage. It became part of the American culture, reported through the media. An example of just how ingrained the crisis had become in the public's consciousness was provided by an article produced on April 25 by the *Los Angeles Times* and published as far away as Chicago and Florida. Titled "Anger at Exxon spills over into black humor" (*Chicago Sun-Times*) and "Wipe those smirks off, Exxon runs a tight ship" (*Orlando Sentinel*), the articles discussed how Exxon had become the punching bag for late-night comedians, radio hosts and

politicians over the spill and their response. Satire and comedic license regarding a crisis are often reflective of the public's awareness of an event and how these events are portrayed through a variety of mediums, demonstrated twenty years later when *South Park* devoted an entire episode parodying BP CEO Tony Hayward and the 2010 Gulf oil spill.

Negative news continued throughout the crisis as Exxon's attempts to deflect blame on to others and frame its response efforts in a positive light were ineffective. In an April 27, 1989 editorial ("Cleaning up the spill would be the best PR), the *Post-Tribune* of Indiana, part of the *Chicago Tribune* news agency, suggested that Exxon had been misleading the public on the pace and effectiveness of its cleanup efforts. The newspaper quoted Dennis Kelso, commissioner of Alaska's Department of Environmental and a visible critic of Exxon, who said: "I get tired of reading all the numbers and then going out in the field, where the results don't match the numbers." The editorial concludes by stating: "The time is for Exxon to admit its responsibility and do as much as it can as quickly as it can to salvage the Alaskan coastline" (1989, p. A4.).

Media outlets in Alaska were particularly harsh. Newspapers openly questioned Exxon's honesty in both its cleanup efforts and attempts to blame others for the slow response. On April 29th, the *Alaska Dispatch News* ran an article titled "Exxon's chief's statements don't square with the facts" (Postman, 1989). The article questioned Exxon's assertions that the state government delayed or prevented the company from using dispersants early in the spill and the effectiveness of the chemicals as Exxon had maintained. The newspaper also suggested that these accusations were constructed later, noting that Exxon Shipping Co.'s Frank Iarossi did not present these complaints during the news conferences he held on March 24 and March 25.

Documentary evidence shows that the Chairman of Exxon Corp. is wrong when he blames the state for the slow response to the Prince William Sound oil spill. Despite

Lawrence Rawl's repeated statements in newspapers, magazines and on television, the state did not stop a chemical attack of the spill in the first days after the March 24 disaster. "Exxon is trying to give the state a black eye, probably to try to escape culpability on behalf of itself," Gov. Steve Cowper said Friday. (Postman, 1998)

The April 30th edition of the *Anchorage Daily* news contained several articles regarding the spill ranging from state Department of Environmental Conservation chief Dennis Kelso being heralded as a local hero (p. A1) to coverage of Congressional actions investigating the spill and limiting Exxon's ability to write-off the costs associated with the spill (p. B1). However, Howard Weaver, the managing editor of the *Anchorage Daily News*, penned an editorial in the same edition (p. E2) that epitomized Exxon's failed strategy of deflection or blame allocation to others. Weaver stated:

> You will hear it argued that because there is so much blame to go around, we shouldn't focus so much attention on Exxon and Alyeska Pipeline Service Co. But that is nonsense. Whatever the structural failures of our government and collective will those are the agencies most responsible for the spill and the devastation that the bungled cleanup has caused. (Weaver, 1989, E2) (See Table 4.1)

Exxon's failed crisis communication strategies emanated from top executives. Perhaps the most notable behavioral or communicative aspect of the crisis surrounds Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl. His actions (or inactions) and statements set a general theme of *minimization, shared responsibility, denial*, and qualified *compensation* and *mortification* Rawl's represented an attitude of arrogance and inappropriate defensiveness, characteristics of Exxon's overall communicative response to the crisis (Jaques, 2008). Rawl did not issue a statement for nearly a

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week after the spill (Seitel, 2004). He also failed to visit the scene of the incident until three weeks after the spill occurred, evoking considerable criticism. This may have been the biggest mistake made by Rawl and Exxon during the crisis as it gave the impression that the spill and pollution problem wasn't important enough to involve Exxon's top management (Holusha, 1989).

Table 2 contains some of Exxon's more controversial or contradictory comments. It also demonstrates the apologia strategy each represents in conjunction with Exxon's advertisement campaign strategy that attempted to influence public perception of the crisis:

Table 2 Exxon Comments and Strategies Employed.

Apologia Strategies	Company Officials	Exxon Advertisement
March 24-March 29, 1989	Silence	
Statement: Top Exxon executives declined to comment for almost a week after the spill.		
March 27, 1989.	Denial, Scapegoating, Shared Responsibility, Silence	
"The captain should have been at the bridge."		
Exxon Shipping also refused to verify the extent of the damage		
March 29, 1989.	Corrective Action, Minimization	
Exxon spokesperson said the company did not expect major environmental damage. He also said experts were heading to the scene of the incident.		

March 29, 1989.	Corrective Action, Differentiation	
Exxon executive Frank Iarossi said Exxon was doing exactly what it should be doing by mobilizing experts and equipment from around the world.		
March 30, 1989.	Admission	
Don Cornett was forced to acknowledge that Exxon would never be able to completely clean up the spill.		
April 2, 1989.	Admission, Compensation	
Exxon admitted that their initial containment efforts had been unsuccessful and that the environmental damage would likely be severe. They also announced they would pay 'reasonable claims' for damage.		
April 3, 1989.	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
Exxon places advertisements in newspapers and magazines throughout the U.S. Exxon Chairman		

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Lawrence Rawl is quoted as saying "I want to tell you how sorry I am that this accident took place. We cannot, of course, undo what has been done. But I can assure you that since March 24, the accident has been receiving our full attention and will continue to do so."

April 3, 1989.	Bolstering, Corrective Action, Differentiation	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
Rawl appeared on a nationally-aired program, stated that the dispersants used by Exxon worked well in tests.		
April 4, 1989,	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
Exxon advertisements and officials apologize and vow to clean up spill. Iarossi publicly stated that: "We do not intend to leave until the job is done . . . we intend to leave Prince William Sound close to what it was before the tragedy."		
April 7, 1989.	Admission, Compensation, Corrective Action, Differentiation, Scapegoating, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose.	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
Rawl appears before the U.S. Congress. He blamed the federal government for the slow or inadequate response. Rawl also "I cannot accept liability ad infinitum where it goes in the world" and suggested putting Captain		

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Hazlewood at the helm was a mistake. Rawl also noted that Exxon would pay for the costs associated with the spill.

April 8, 1989. *Exxon Senior Vice President Ulyesse LaGrange heralded "a job well-done in the most difficult circumstances." Iarossi denied government claims that Exxon was not doing enough to clean up the spill and responded with "absolutely not" to questions as to whether Exxon should feel embarrassed or ashamed to effectively respond to the spill.*	Bolstering, Corrective Action, Denial, Differentiation, Scapegoating, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
April 9, 1989. *Exxon announced it was removing nearly 100,000 gallons of oil per day. Government sources stated the amount was less than half of what Exxon suggested.*	Bolstering, Corrective Action	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
April 11, 1989. *Don Cornett states: "Credibility is everything" and that the spill "shouldn't have happened. "We're*	Admission, Corrective Action, Compensation, Mortification	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose

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going to take care of these people."

April 17, 1989. *Exxon representative Cal Sikstrom said Monday it has taken longer that he hoped or expected to open a center for animals affected by the spill. "I am as frustrated as anyone by the delays," he said.*	Admission, Mortification	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
April 18, 1989. *Exxon official blamed the recent rise in prices on clean-air regulations, higher seasonal demand and new state excise taxes.* .	Denial, Differentiation, Scapegoating	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
April 19, 1989. *Exxon official Holcomb said he decided to send birds harmed by the spill elsewhere because he feared they could not stand the delay. "This is a crisis," he said.*	Admission, Corrective Action	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
April 23, 1989. *Exxon claimed in that 'natural action' was cleaning significant amounts of the spill.*	Minimization, Shared Responsibility	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose

April 25, 1989.

K.T. Koonce,* Exxon *USA vice president for exploration and production, said 70 percent of the evaporated, dissipated or been recovered. (The government disputed the figure disputed, suggests if was based on Exxon computer models). Exxon's Hugh Brown could not verify Koone's statement and said: ". . . I'm pretty sure the public relations people are going to come up with a statement on it."	Admission, Bolstering, Corrective Action	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose
April 30, 1989. ***Exxon Chairman Lawrence Rawl explained why he didn't immediately go to the scene of the crisis: "I figured the best thing to do was to stay by the phone."***	Differentiation, Shared Responsibility	Admission, Corrective Action, Mortification, Shared Responsibility, Unity of Purpose

Table 2. This chart represents the apologia strategies of Exxon's comments during the Prince William Sound oil crisis and the official advertisements of Exxon during the same period.

Rawl's rationale for his lack of visibility early in the crisis was conveyed in an April 30th interview given from his "spacious" Manhattan apartment on April 30: "I figured the best thing to do was by the phone. So I spent the day on the phone at home, basically" (Martinez, 1989). He also suggested his presence would detract from the critical first task of keeping the supertanker from spilling more oil. While undoubtedly monitoring events, his lack of visibility produced optics of a wealthy CEO engaging in a "bunker mentality" rather than being on scene

and taking a hands-on approach that conveys corporate and personal responsibility. By waiting three weeks before traveling to Alaska, Rawl was criticized as showing his insensitivity to the ecological disaster the *Valdez* oil spill had brought to the pristine Alaskan coastline (Holusha, 1989). It also sent a message to those affected, such as Alaskan fisherman and businesses, that well-paid executives were unconcerned with their plight, even if their company caused it. The absence of Rawl as noted in media reports served to allow the public to frame their perception of Exxon through the media, attribute blame and ascribe their own emotions to the event (Coombs, 2006; Harris, 1991; Kim & Cameron, 2011; Nabi, 2003). It further emphasized the public's existing negative perception of industrial events and environmental damage.

Early crisis communicative mistakes can be difficult to overcome. However, repeated mistakes or strategies that reinforce negative perceptions regarding a company's management of a crisis become descriptive narratives for their overall performance. Lawrence Rawl became emblematic of Exxon's crisis failures and its unwillingness to recognize the full damage the event had caused and accept responsibility for it. After being perceived as absent during a critical period, Rawl's initial public statements were information-based regarding the chemical processes used to disperse the oil. Exxon's early communication was to refer to the incident as an "accident" and focus on the technical aspects of the crisis and the cleanup by emphasizing the redemptive power of technology (Hearit, 1995). Rawl made no apologies to the fisherman or communities affected and showed no emotion over the impact of the disaster (Fearn-Banks, 2002). In fact, it took a full ten days to issues an apology in Exxon's belated media blitz placed in newspapers throughout the U.S. (Seitel, 2004). With Rawl's initial *silence* and questions regarding the effectiveness and efficacy of the *corrective action* of Exxon's cleanup efforts, public outrage continued to escalate and media coverage grew more negative.

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The multiple voices that represented Exxon during the crisis also added to questions regarding Exxon's credibility and social legitimacy. While Don Cornett appeared to be an attractive and effective communicator, the comments of others often produced contradictory information and message strategies. Furthermore, Rawl's reluctance to engage the media and appear onsite early on in the crisis produced the perception of corporate arrogance or indifference by the public, media and government officials (Fearn-Banks, 2002; Jaques, 2008). This coincided with criticisms leveled against Exxon in general regarding the sparse information it provided and its accuracy. By failing to constantly address the media and provide information to the general public regarding the severity of the crisis, Exxon committed an ethical lapse and abdicated the organization's responsibility to the public (Pauly & Hutchison, 2005). This damaged the social legitimacy that Hearit (1995, 2004, 2006, 2011) and others suggest should be the purpose of apologia.

At his first news conference which was finally held on April 19, 1989, Lawrence Rawl once again allocated blame through *scapegoating*, *shared responsibility and differentiation*. He reiterated that his company wanted to immediately spread dispersants but was prevented by a lack of approval from government officials. "It was incumbent on those officials to give us a prompt response instead of none," Rawl said (*Houston Chronicle*, 1989). Rawl's aversion to the media spotlight was well-known. However, crises are unique events with the possibility of very high negative impacts on a company and its much-coveted reputation, particularly with environmental disasters and media biases toward such events (Harris, 1991). The lack of visibility and Rawl's lack of emotive response, while perhaps simply a personality trait, reinforced the negative perception many have of corporations. His appearance before Congress continued the defensiveness that characterized Exxon's response along with attempting to evoke

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a *shared responsibility* which is tantamount to diverting blame (*scapegoating* and *differentiation*). This approach contradicted the apology Exxon conveyed in the newspaper advertisements placed ten days after the event. For weeks after the event, Rawl appeared to have a complete lack of understanding for the anger and frustration the public had toward Exxon regarding the spill. "It's not clear to me why people are so angry at us" (Amdt & Waidder, 1989).

Rawl's and other Exxon executives' continuous public sparring with government officials also hurt Exxon's reputation. While culpability for planning and response failures involved many, including government agencies and regulations, the public perceived these failures as a continuation of Exxon placing blame on others rather than accepting responsibility. Alaskan Governor Steve Cowper continued to publicly assail Exxon's efforts and questioned the honesty of their public statements throughout the crisis. Cowper accused Exxon of misleading the public and shirking the blame for Exxon's slow response to the spill, contradicting Rawl's statements that they were prevented from immediately applying dispersants due to bureaucratic dithering. Rawl responded in a letter that Cowper was perpetuating: "a good many wrong assertions" (*Miami Herald*, 1989).   Natural disasters and crises reveal crucial failures in crisis management capacity and political issues influence public perception and blame attributions (Gephart, 1984; Shrivastava, et al., 1998; Waugh, 2006; Wicks, 2001). While accepting some of the blame and responsibility, the Bush Administration and the state government of Alaska repeatedly contradicted the assertions from Exxon executives and spokespersons and leveled sustained criticism on Exxon's handling of the spill. This fed the media narrative that Exxon was not a credible actor in the *Valdez* crisis and continued and continued to increase the negative perception the public had toward the company.

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A retrospective evaluation of the communication strategies employed by Exxon during the 1989 Exxon *Valdez* oil spill crisis provides context to the 2010 BP Gulf oil spill crisis. Surpassing the *Valdez* in size and prominence, BP suffered from many of the same missteps that so greatly damaged the reputation of Exxon during the 1989 crisis. Poor planning, a failure to consider contingencies for worst-case scenarios, delayed recognition of the severity of the incidents and slow responses characterized each company's reaction to their respective crisis. Most notably, and relevant to answering the research questions presented in this dissertation, are the failed crisis communication strategies produced by Exxon's and BP's executives. For Exxon, their defensive response and attempts to limit legal exposure were presented by most of the key executives who appeared before media. Although disjointed and often incoherent, this appears to have been an intentional, systematic crisis communication response strategy. CEO Lawrence Rawl, as the head of the organization, received the most scrutiny and, therefore, most of the blame for Exxon's failures. What is surprising, however, is how many of the rhetorical mistakes that characterized the Exxon *Valdez* crisis were repeated twenty years later when the Deepwater Horizon rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Like Exxon, BP and its executives would face significant media, public and government scrutiny not only for it crisis planning and response but also for the communicative efforts during the crisis.

BP's Crisis Communication Strategies

On April 20, the *Deepwater Horizon* exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 people, starting a 6-month long saga of oil pouring into the Gulf of Mexico. By the time the well was capped and declared "dead," approximately 3.19 million barrels of oil had flowed into the Gulf or 210 million US gallons (Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, n.d., para.1). By contrast, the spill of oil by Exxon in Prince William Sound was approximately 260,000 barrels of

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oil or 11 million US gallons (Exxon *Valdez* Oil Spill Trustee Council, n.d., para.7). Like the Exxon *Valdez*, as news of the spill began to surface, media converged on the site and the crisis became an international story.

In 1990, when BP's *American Trader* ran over its anchor less than a year after the *Valdez*, BP appeared to have learned from Exxon's many planning and crisis communication mistakes. Prior to the *American Trader* oil spill, the company had studied reports on the management of the Exxon oil spill in Alaska (Gellert, et al., 1994). BP was lauded for its efforts during the *American Trader* incident and in contrast to Exxon's management of the *Valdez* accident the year before, state officials in California and the U.S. Coast Guard on-scene coordinator gave BP an exemplary grade for its skimming efforts and its preventing most of the oil from reaching California's prized beaches (Churm, 1990). BP immediately assumed responsibility for the spill and consistently communicated with state and federal officials on the progress of the cleanup efforts as well as updated the public through regular press conferences. Subsequently, BP received far less media attention for its spill which occurred not long after the Exxon *Valdez,* and the coverage was predominately positive toward BP.

Twenty years later, BP appeared to have forgotten the lessons the industry was supposed to have learned from the Exxon *Valdez*; its executives in 2010 were as ineffective at addressing the media as Exxon's. Unlike in 1989 when the Exxon *Valdez* discharged the oil, advances in communication technology by 2010 resulted in 24-hour news coverage, live feeds, and continual access to information and opinions regarding the spill. Subsequently, misstatements and ill-advised comments by BP executives were disseminated through multiple means, which further inflamed public anger at the company and negated any coordinated crisis communication strategies employed by BP public relation professionals. Like Exxon, BP CEO Tony Hayward

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made notable mistakes early in the crisis and continued to make the crisis worse for BP by repeatedly making comments that reflected poorly on the organization, its ability to effectively manage the crisis, and in BP's attempt to regain public trust and reestablish social legitimacy that was damaged by the magnitude and uncertainty of the leaking well.

On April 29, 2010 *The New York Times* reported that, when meeting with top BP officials in London regarding the spill, Hayward remarked: "What the hell did we do to deserve this" (Dodd, 2010; Walsh, 2010)? Although not meant for public consumption, the comment did not reflect either concern for those killed in the accident or a concern for the growing environmental impact of the spill. Rather, Hayward conveyed concern only for BP and its executives and not the thousands who were impacted by this disaster. Hayward demonstrated s*elf-pity* as this comment reflected a lack of awareness for the hundreds of thousands whose lives would be negatively affected by the spill. Negative images of industrial accidents and environmental disasters coupled with the media's narratives shape public perceptions (Harris, 1991). As dramatic intensity increases there are mistakes to be called-out and named "villains" to blame Wickman, 2014). As the CEO, Tony Hayward's comments not only undermined BP's official crisis communication strategy, he became the face of the villainous company.

Hayward's statements did not convey the same messaging strategy as the company's news releases. For example, an April 25, 2010 release entitled "BP Gulf of Mexico Spill Response Accelerating" contained information regarding steps BP and others were taking to respond to the spill and secure the well. In it, Tony Hayward is quoted as noting "the safety of our people working offshore is our top priority . . ." (BP, 2010, April 25) and he expressed confidence that BP could handle the spill. The release takes the strategic approach of noting the c*orrective action* taken to contain the spill and demonstrates a u*nity of purpose* or common goal

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in stopping the leak and cleaning up any damage, along with some acknowledgement of the lives lost by noting the prioritization of ensuring worker's safety. This release was followed on April 26 with another one, one that was geared toward shareholders and titled "First Quarter Results" (BP, 2010, April 26). The release reported financial and performance data and included one short paragraph that mentioned the *Deepwater Horizon* incident and BP's commitment to mitigating the environmental consequences of the spill. Once again, the message conveyed, in addition to shareholder reassurances, was c*orrective action* about managing the crisis and containing the damage to the company and the environment.

On April 28, BP released: "BP Pledges full support for Deepwater Horizon probes" (BP, 2010, April 28). This release announced BP's support for and cooperation with the U.S. government's investigations into the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster along with the company launching its own investigation. Tony Hayward is quoted as expressing sympathy for the lives lost during the rig explosion and expresses BP's willingness as part of the "industry" to and interest in participating fully in the investigations (BP, 2010, April 28). With a greater focus on those killed during the incident, Hayward's scripted comments convey a message of contrition and s*hared responsibility* and u*nity of purpose*. This strategy is rather smart since, given the growing media attention and public awareness, an investigation into the incident would certainly take place. The release suggests that not only did BP want to know how the crisis happened, it wanted to work with others in finding out.

The next release on April 28 contains information regarding the measures and steps BP was taking to address the spill and the resources BP had marshalled in the effort (BP, 2010, April 28). Tony Hayward is quoted as noting the importance of safety, stresses the amount of resources and effort BP was putting into the containment and resolution effort, and the

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unprecedented response that BP had initiated including working with others to resolve the spill. The release again notes the c*orrective action* the company was taking and, by working with others to resolve the spill, a u*nity of purpose* toward resolving the crisis.

The official news releases by BP show a consistent strategy of noting the *corrective action* that the company was taking to contain the spill and stop the leak and that it was in consultation and coordinating with others on the crisis. By taking this approach, BP appears to be placing itself on the side of the public and government officials who wanted this crisis resolved by containing the spill and limiting the damage done, as well as putting structures in place to prevent a future spill. When *The New York Times* published Hayward's comments, the *self-pity* statement undermined the *unity of purpose* strategy employed by BP and contradicted statements in the official releases attributed to Hayward.

On April 30, BP notes that 2,500 personnel were working toward the spill and mitigation efforts and provided additional information regarding spill containment efforts and booms being placed in the affected states. Tony Hayward is quoted as seeing the full "global resources" (BP, 2010, April 30) of BP being allocated toward the spill and cleanup and containment efforts, welcomes efforts by governmental and private entities in their effort to protect the coasts and contain the spill and takes full responsibility for the cleanup and financial impacts of the spill (*admission*, *unity of purpose*, *compensation*).

In a May 1, news release (BP, 2010, May 1) which covers Tony Hayward's response to President Obama's comments on the spill, Hayward commends President Obama's leadership and their mutual commitment to stopping the leak, along with noting the cooperation of the federal government and BP's efforts. Hayward then pledged to do "anything and everything we can" to stop the leak (c*orrective action* and u*nity of purpose).* Hayward's prepared statements

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included in the company's media releases were reflective of BP's communication strategy. The releases also afforded BP the opportunity to correct erroneous information reported regarding the spill and attempt to establish credibility and trust. For example, on May 2, BP attempted to clarify media reports and stated that their efforts to date had not resulted in any reduction of flow from the blown-out well, since some reports had suggested progress (*admission*) (BP, 2010, May 2). However, Hayward's public statements continued to contradict or undermine BP's apologia strategy as well as comments attributed to Hayward included in the official media releases.

On May 3, 2010, Hayward once again found himself amid controversy after an interview with *NBC*. In it, Hayward says that while BP is "absolutely responsible" for cleaning up the spill, it is not to blame for the accident. "This was not our accident . . . This was not our drilling rig . . . This was Transocean's rig. Their systems. Their people. Their equipment" (Wray, 2010). This shifting of blame, or *denial*, would later be repeated in an appearance before Congress, one in which he and the other executives would be heavily criticized by members of Congress for not accepting responsibility for the catastrophe. It appears that Hayward was attempting to walk a line between casting blame on Transocean while accepting responsibility for stopping the spill and the cleanup (*shared responsibility, unity of purpose*).

The crisis was not solely BP's. Transocean, which owned and operated the rig, and Haliburton, which supplied the cement intended to secure the well and prevent leaks, also were under scrutiny. However, the public perception was that the crisis was largely BP's responsibility since it owned the well and contracted with Transocean for the drilling. Hayward's May 3rd comments to *NBC* represent denial—not the admission represented in the official news releases and statement attributed to him. By suggestion that Transocean or Haliburton were to blame, Hayward also may have been (perhaps intentionally) trying to lay the

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groundwork to recover some of the costs associated with the spill and compensation BP promised. His comments were reinforced by public statements by BP spokesman Andrew Gowers who said earlier that the "accident took place on a rig owned, managed and operated by Transocean" and ". . . the unfolding events do not arise from a failure of BP's safety systems" (Krauss, 2010). However, it does not entirely reflect the "full responsibility" that BP's later news release seemed to suggest the company was taking. Hayward and Gower's public comments were later contradicted on May 25 when BP released the details of an internal inquiry and admitted "a number of companies are involved, including BP, and it is simply too early—and not up to us—to say who is at fault" (*BBC News*; Wray, 2010).

On May 13, 2010, Hayward evoked more controversy. He told the *Guardian* that the oil spill was "relatively tiny" (Dodd, 2010; Walsh, 2010; Wray, 2010). "The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume." In the same interview, Hayward also said: "It was a bit bumpy to get it going. We made a few little mistakes early on" (Dodd, 2011; Wray, 2010). While presenting *admission*, Hayward also reflected *minimization*. This was particularly problematic given that BP still did not know how it was going to kill the well or if its efforts would be successful. On May 13, BP released an "Update on Gulf of Mexico oil spill response—13 May." The release provided an update on the company's "progressing options" of stopping the flow of oil from the damaged well and the "number of potential intervention" efforts they could undertake (*corrective action*). These options, BP notes, are made in conjunction with government officials and industry experts (*unity of purpose*). BP also discussed its containment efforts and the number of personnel dedicated to the cleanup efforts. Nonetheless, Hayward's dismissiveness undermined BP's efforts at relaying the high number of individuals involved, the

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coordination with others since, if the impact would be minimal, then why would BP be allocating so many resources toward the spill?

Furthermore, Hayward's statements to the *Guardian* failed to reflect the sense of urgency and public pressure faced not only by BP, but also the Obama administration—which was being criticized for the government's failure to resolve the crisis. Also occurring on May 13, Hayward stated: "we understand and share President Obama's sense of urgency . . ." (BP, 2010, May 13). After thanking the president and his administration for the engagement, Hayward went on to note that BP was working with a variety of people in government, with scientists and with industry to stop the oil flow, remove the oil from the ocean's surface, to protect the coastline and to mitigate the impact on communities and individuals. The release ends with Hayward stating that BP is "fully participating in investigations that will provide valuable lessons on how to prevent future incidents of this nature" (*corrective action* and *unity of purpose)*. President Obama's public comments raised the pressure on BP to stop the flow of oil from the well, cleanup the oil and help those impacted. His statements and those of other government officials do not suggest that the environmental impact would be minimal nor are concerns regarding the damage unfounded.

Pressure from President Obama and continual media coverage continued to escalate the crisis. Once again, Hayward suggested that the environmental impact would be rather small (*minimization*). On May 18, 2010, in an interview with *Sky News,* Hayward says:

It is impossible to say and we will mount, as part of the aftermath, a very detailed environmental assessment but everything we can see at the moment suggests that the overall environmental impact of the spill will be very, very modest (Wray, 2010).

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Prior to Hayward's reiteration that the environmental impact would be small, BP updated the public on its efforts to stop the oil from leaking from the well. The release concludes by noting the number of personnel involved in the shut-off, clean-up and containment efforts as well as the number of claims filed and paid by BP to this point (BP, 2010, May 16). The following day, BP announced $70 million dollars in grants to four of the Gulf states impacted by the spill. These grants were supplemental or in addition to funds BP had already allocated toward the crisis. Tony Hayward is quoted as saying "The Gulf Coast is our home too . . ." and provides brief information about efforts to contain the spill (BP, 2010, May 17). Clearly the company recognized that the environmental damage would be widespread, involving at least four Gulf shore states and that their respective industries. The company's strategy reflected *compensation, unity of purpose,* and *corrective action* while its CEO's public comments *minimized* the crisis at the same time President Obama proclaimed the spill the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history (Dodd, 2012).

Any progress the company had made was negated when, in an appearance before a mass of reporters in Louisiana on May 30, Tony Hayward uttered his most infamous comments about the crisis:

> The first thing to say is I'm sorry. We're sorry for the massive disruption it's caused their lives. There's no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back. (Raedle, 2010; *Reuters*, 2010; Walsh, 2010; Wray, 2010).

This comment was particularly harmful to Hayward and BP given that eleven people had died, and hundreds of thousands of lives and livelihoods were disrupted, along with the considerable environmental damage that was caused. In addition, at this point in the crisis there was no

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accurate estimation as to how long the damaged well would continue to spew oil into the Gulf of Mexico. While Hayward did demonstrate *mortification* with the apology and the acknowledgement, his *self-pity* came across as particularly callous and unsympathetic to all those affected and overshadowed the *mortification* he was attempting to convey on BP's behalf. The self-absorbed comment by Hayward received considerable media attention, with 2,152 sources found on *Access World News* that reported the comment along with over 30,000 references available through a search of *Google* and over 130,000 on *Yahoo*. Once again, Hayward's ill-advised comment presents BP and its executives as more concerned with themselves and the company than those impacted by the spill.

Causing further damage on May 30, Hayward responded to *CNN's* reports that workers participating in the cleanup efforts were becoming sick. Hayward responded by dismissing the issue as merely food poisoning: "Food poisoning is clearly a big issue" (Walsh, 2010). Following the now-infamous "I want my life back" gaffe, this strategy of *denial* further angered the public and damaged attempts by BP to take responsibility and make amends to those impacted. This directly contradicted the theme of BP's communication on May 26, (BP, 2010, May 26) in which the company said: "BP has said consistently that it will pay legitimate claims for loss and damage caused by the spill." In the release, Hayward was quoted as discussing a simple and fair claims process to which BP was committed, in order to get "funds to people who have been hurt by this disaster as quickly as possible,"—thus employing strategies of *compensation* and *admission*.

As if these statements did not cause enough problems, Hayward disputed claims of large oil plumes below the ocean surface the following day, May 31, when he was confronted with scientific evidence (and images). Hayward, using *denial*, stated: "The oil is on the surface. There

aren't any plumes" (Walsh, 2010). Just four days earlier on May 27 (BP, 2010, May 28), and again on May 29, BP announced the measures it was taking to stop the flow from the damaged well and the "full top kills procedure" along with other actions it would take if it was successful. The release noted that the "top kill procedure has never before been attempted at these depths and its ultimate success is uncertain." BP's strategy in this release of *corrective action* along with the fact that the government had approved this effort (*unity of purpose*) which stressed the uncertainty of its kill efforts, being careful to leave room for failure and to not speak in absolute terms less events cause the effort to be proved to be wrong. While BP's communication team was cautious and sought to lower expectations, Hayward was reckless and spoke with uniformed certainty, undermining his and BP's credibility further when his statement was revealed to simply not be true (Walsh, 2010).

Aware of the public relations nightmare the spill and Hayward's comments were causing, BP initiated a $50 million national advertising campaign which emphasized a strategy of *mortification*, and featured Hayward in which he pledged: "For those affected and your families, I'm deeply sorry. We will make this right" (Wray, 2010). The following day, President Obama criticized the money spent on the advertisements and suggested that the money should instead have gone toward clean-up efforts and restitution. "What I don't wanna hear is when they're spending that kind of money on their shareholders and spending that kind of money on TV advertising that they're nickel and diming fisherman" (*BBC News*, 2010). It was suggested that this public relations effort was an attempt similar to one employed by Johnson & Johnson in 1982 during the Tylenol cyanide poisoning crisis and by Exxon following the *Valdez* disaster—in which they spent more on communicating their efforts to resolve the crisis then they did on actually solving the crisis. The public relations campaign was criticized by many, noting that the

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well was still gushing oil and that the advertisements were competing with the 24-hour live streaming of the flowing oil (Smith, 2010). BP's official news releases on May 30th and May 31st reinforced the uncertainties associated with its well cap efforts and its requisite "risks and uncertainties" associated with its operations and then noted the amount the company had paid out so far for the spill (*corrective action* and *compensation*). The contrast, however, between the continued apologies and the ongoing uncertainty and damaged did not go unnoticed by the media and others. As late as October of 2010, BP's advertisement campaign and Tony Hayward were pilloried on an episode of *South Park* where Hayward was shown repeatedly apologizing in various scenes such as petty a baby seal, baking cookies and skiing while saying repeatedly "We're sorry." The plot of the episode (*Coon 2: Hindsight*) revolves around how BP had released an enormous evil creature that causes mass destruction after BP had drilled for oil in the Gulf of Mexico (Parker, 2009*).

At the same time the advertising campaign was under way, the *Financial Times* published an interview with Hayward in which he admitted BP was unprepared for a spill at those depths. Hayward acknowledged: "We did not have the tools you would want in your toolkit." (Wray, 2010). While following the strategy of BP in the national advertisement campaign of mortification, Hayward offered an admission that BP was unprepared to manage a damaged well at those depths and to follow-up with an effective response to a spill of this magnitude. Included in the May 31st official news release (BP, 2010, May 31) were statements by Hayward "that BP's priority is to keep as much oil as we can from causing additional harm to the Gulf, the shoreline and the people of the region." The release also noted that its efforts were undertaken after extensive consultation with key members of the Obama administration, government scientists and other officials. Again, the official crisis communication strategy is the *corrective action* BP

was taken regarding the crisis and the *unity of purpose* and *shared responsibility* for its resolution. On June 2, 2010, BP announced it was releasing money for states whose tourism was impacted and as well as the fact that it was funding an escrow account for Louisiana Barrier Island construction. In doing so, BP noted that this was a government initiative and, as such, it would assume no liability (BP, 2010, June 2). While this release demonstrates continued *corrective action, unity of purpose* and *shared responsibility*, BP was careful not to assume responsibility or promise results for projects directed by the U.S. government.

The misstatements by Tony Hayward were not the only public comments that received notoriety. After meeting with President Obama and White House officials on June 16, 2010, Svanberg spoke to reporters, apologized, and thanked the American people for their patience during the spill. However, he followed that statement with a comment that appeared to be condescending; he stated: "We care about the small people" (abcnews.com, 2010; *BBC News*, Condon, 2010; 2010; Scudder, 2010; Wray, 2010). His statement received a vitriolic reaction online and from people in the Gulf coast region impacted by the spill (msnbc.com, 2010). BP tried to quell the strong reaction by suggesting that Svanberg, a native of Sweden, simply misspoke due to his less than perfect grasp of the English language. BP Spokesman Toby Odone told The *Associated Press*: "What he means is that he cares about local businesses and local people. This was a slip in translation" (Wray, 2010). This was followed by Svanberg's own apology for the remark stating that he responded "clumsily" and tried to clarify what he meant by his remarks the previous day (Calmes & Cooper, 2010; msnbc.com, 2010). Svanberg's remarks, however unintentional they might have been, once again seemed like *self-pity* where, in which BP had concerns for the less important victims—in addition to being concerned about itself and its well-paid executives.

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While originally expressing *differentiation* and *mortification*, Svanberg's "clumsy" response undermined the effectiveness of his attempts following a meeting with the president, an occasion that should have also demonstrated a *unity of purpose* with President Obama and his administration, who had been highly critical of BP's handling of the spill. Like Hayward, Svanberg's poor word choice occurred during a public apology and also evoked several media references to Hayward's May 30th comment of "I want my life back" which also followed his apology on behalf of BP. Ironically, both Svanberg and Hayward had to issue a subsequent apology for the comments they made while they were attempting to apologize for the disaster. Svanberg's misstatement simply reinforced the public perception that BP not only was mismanaging the crisis, but also seemed insincere in its penitence and lacked awareness of the effects that the spill had had on so many.

Hayward was relatively absent from the official news releases issued by BP during this time. BP's strategy of *compensation*, *corrective action* and *admission* were present in three news releases issued on June 4, June 6 and June 7. On June 4, BP issued a release (BP, 2010, June 4) which announced BP would send an advance payment to individuals and businesses financially harmed by the spill, an amount that would collectively amount to $84 million to date. BP also announced that it would not seek repayment for any money it had overpaid, a smart decision to avoid future bad publicity. The releases on June 6 and June 7 provided updates on additional steps BP was talking to contain the spill such as constructing berms of the Louisiana coast (BP, 2010, June 6) and efforts at capping the (BP, 2010, June 7). Doug Suttles, chief operating officer of BP Exploration and Production, was quoted in the release instead of Tony Hayward. The June 7 release also again noted the "risks and uncertainties" about capping efforts on the well and stated that this had never been attempted at these depths. These releases, along with the fact that

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Svanberg spoke on the company's behalf after the White House meeting, shows that BP was very cognizant of the amount of bad publicity Hayward's previous comments had injected into an already difficult crisis communication situation. However, like a recurring nightmare, Hayward would once again make statements that fueled the existing anger among the public and key U.S. government officials.

On June 17, 2010, Tony Hayward appeared for a much-anticipated hearing before the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee of the U.S. Congress. His responses to members of Congress were viewed as evasive and uniformed and were highly criticized by members of the committee (Broder, 2010; *CNN*, 2010; *The Guardian*, 2010). Among his responses were: "I can't possibly know why the decisions were made (on the rig);" "I don't know;" I can't answer the question in that form. I can't recall the number;" "I can't answer because I wasn't there;" "I'm afraid I can't recall;" "I can't recall that either;" "That was a decision I was not a party to;" "I wasn't part of the decision-making process in this well;" "I don't know;" and "I'm afraid I don't know that either" (Chen, 2010; *U.S. Congressional Record*, 2010; Walsh, 2010; Wray, 2010). This approach of *differentiation* and *self-pity* evoked additional anger toward Hayward and BP. Hayward's now-infamous testimony was widely diffused through various media sources and other sites, demonstrated by over 420,00 results from a *Google* search.

BP's official news releases offered more concrete details on their containment and compensation efforts. On June 16, the day before Hayward's testimony, BP issued a release with a conciliatory tone regarding President Obama's recent comments and agreed with him that all "legitimate claims are paid out in a fair and timely manner" along with noting their executives would meet with him that day (BP, 2010, June 16). In addition to continuing to state the amount of money allocated by BP to individuals and entities as a result of the spill and cleanup efforts,

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BP also revealed that one of its ships responsible for oil containment from the well had to suspend operations (BP, 2010, June 15).

By revealing in a news release that the *Discoverer Enterprise* was temporarily shut-down due to a fire caused by a lightning strike, BP's crisis communication team got ahead of a story that could have added to the negative media narrative had they not immediately come forward. This openness was in stark contrast to Hayward's perceived evasiveness during his testimony before Congress. The releases on the *Discovery Enterprise* noted that "all safety shut-down systems operated as designed" (BP, 2010, June 15). This suggested that BP's cleanup, containment and well-killing operations were functioning at high levels of safety, unlike Transocean's operation of the rig that caused the explosion. A subsequent release stated that the minor crisis was over and that the *Discoverer Enterprise* was resuming its operations, once it received authorization from the U.S. Coast Guard (BP, 2015, June 15). Officially, BP's efforts represented strategies of *corrective action*, *compensation*, *admission*, *bolstering, shared responsibility* and *minimization* (of the *Discoverer Enterprise* fire) and *unity of purpose* while Tony Hayward's demonstrated *self-pity* and a negative application of *shared responsibility* (by suggesting he was not heavily involved and others were responsible for the disaster).

Hayward's evasiveness before Congress also was contradicted by official BP releases that discussed the company's efforts along with the billions it set aside, due to an agreement that arose from thier meeting with President Obama, releases that quoted both BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg and Hayward himself. The June 16, release included lengthy quotes from each and displayed *unity of purpose*, *compensation* and *admission*. Svanberg was quoted as appreciating the:

…constructive meeting conducted by the President and his senior advisers and are

confident that the agreement announced today will provide greater comfort to the

citizens of the Gulf coast and greater clarity to BP and its shareholders. We welcome

the administration's statements acknowledging that BP is a strong company and that the

administration has no interest in undermining the financial stability of BP (BP, 2010,

June 16).

The release continued with a quotation by CEO Tony Hayward who said:

From the outset we have said that we fully accepted our obligations as a responsible

party. This agreement reaffirms our commitment to do the right thing. The President

made it clear and we agree that our top priority is to contain the spill, clean up the oil and

mitigate the damage to the Gulf coast community. We will not rest until the job is done.

(BP, 2010, June 16).

Hayward's official statement of "we will not rest until the job is done" became

particularly ironic, just three days later. On June 19, 2010, Hayward was pictured sailing on his

yacht sailing off the coast of the Isle of Wright in the "Round the Island" yacht race, sponsored

by JP Morgan Asset Management. Media outlets pounced on the damaging image of Hayward

relaxing on his yacht and portrayed it as a PR nightmare for Hayward and BP (*BBC*, 2010;

Gomstyn, 2010; *Fox News*, 2010; Kennedy, 2010; Robbins, 2010; Satter, 2010; Sherwell, 2010).

While BP tried to manage the additional bad publicity by suggesting that this was the first time

Hayward had off since the crisis began, Hayward would not recover from this latest in a series of

publicity blunders. Chairman Svanberg soon removed him from heading BP's response to the

Gulf oil spill disaster, replacing him with New York City native Robert Dudley. "It is clear

Tony has made remarks that have upset people," Svanberg stated when announcing the move (Gomstyn, 2010).

With oil still gushing from the well and thousands feeling the impact of it directly, Hayward's mini-vacation on his private yacht was yet another public relations disaster. As shown, Hayward had been a gaffe machine since the onset of the crisis (Walsh, 2010). This imagery once again undermined BP's official strategies of *compensation*, *unity of purpose*, *corrective action* and *admission* the company had employed consistently in its official statements, particularly in the days prior to his ill-fated testimony and poor choice of sailing. Hayward, and BP's explanation for his yachting excursion portrayed *self-pity* and a continued lack of conveying and understanding the impact and suffering people along the Gulf coast were enduring. A month later, Hayward "resigned" from BP, claiming he was "demonised and vilified" in the U.S. for the Gulf of Mexico spill (Mason, 2010). Once again, Hayward seemed oblivious to the problems he caused himself and the company; his behavior demonstrated the self-pity and lack of awareness that exemplified his stewardship over the crisis.

As demonstrated in Table 3, BP CEO Tony Hayward's apologia strategy is vastly different and often contradictory to the planned apologia and media strategy during the same period. A CEO must appear caring, contrite and responsible during a crisis which causes death, economic harm or environmental damage (Scudder, 2010). The intentional framing of the narrative employed by BP was consistently undermined by Hayward and the comments of others (e.g. BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg) and fed the public anger and negative perception of BP's management of the crisis. One of the more damaging strategies reflected in Hayward's comments was self-pity. With the loss of life and economic damage cause by the spill, self-pity gives the appearance that a company is more concerned with the damage and problems to the

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company than how it has impacted others. BP's planned organizational apologia strategies were to note the *corrective action* that was being taken to mitigate the spill and damage, the collective cause or effort of "all" (*unity of purpose*), the *admission* that it was largely responsible for the spill and its cleanup, to offer *compensation* for the victims and those impacted, and a *bolstering* or self-adulation strategy to remind publics of the positive efforts the company was taking as ancillary measures to the spill.

The strategies and categorization of Tony Hayward's comments were then compared to the official corporate responses of BP for comparison and analysis. The results are listed in the chart below:

Table 3 Hayward and Exxon Strategies Compared

Apologia Strategies	Tony Hayward	BP Official News Releases
April 29, 2010. *"What the hell did we do to deserve this?"*	Self-Pity	Corrective Action (3), Unity of Purpose (3), Shared Responsibility
May 3, 2010. *"This was not our accident…"*	Denial, Corrective Action, Shared Responsibility. Scapegoating	Corrective Action, Unity of Purpose (2), Admission (2), Compensation
May 13, 2010. The oil spill is *"relatively tiny." "The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean…We made a few little mistakes early on"*	Minimization, Admission	Corrective Action (2), Unity of Purpose (2)
May 18, 2010.	Minimization	Corrective Action (2), Unity of Purpose (2), Compensation

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"…the overall environmental impact of the spill will be very, very modest."

May 30, 2010.	*Mortification, Self-Pity, Denial,*	*Corrective Action (3), Unity of Purpose, Admission (2), Compensation (2)*
"The first thing to say is I'm sorry… There's no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back."		
May 31, 2010.		
"The oil is on the surface. There aren't any plumes."		
June 3, 2010.	*Mortification, Admission*	*Corrective Action (4), Unity of Purpose (3), Shared Responsibility (3), Admission (2), Compensation*
"For those affected and your families, I'm deeply sorry. We will make this right."		
"We did not have the tools you would want in your toolkit."		
June 16, 2010.	*Differentiation*	*Corrective Action (3), Admission, Compensation (3)*
"We care about the small people."		
June 17, 2010.	*Differentiation, Self-Pity, Scapegoating*	*Corrective Action (3), Unity of Purpose (3), Admission (2), Compensation (2), Bolstering (2), Minimization (2)*
"I don't know…I can't recall…I can't recall that either…That was a decision I was not a party to…"		
June 19, 2010.	*Self-Pity*	

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Hayward is pictured sailing on his yacht.	*Corrective Action (2), Unity of Purpose (2), Shared Responsibility, Admission, Compensation (3)*

Table 3. This chart represents the apologia strategies of BP CEO Tony Hayward's most controversial comments during the BP Gulf oil crisis and a comment by BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg along with the official news releases of BP during the same period.

Comparison and Evaluation of Exxon and BP

In the case of BP, CEO Tony Hayward became the most cited example of "what not to say during a crisis" circa 2010, much like that of Lawrence Rawl in 1989. What makes Hayward's conduct so interesting based upon a reflective examination of Exxon's communication strategy two decades earlier—are not only the similarities of the crises (oil spills and crisis management planning failures), but the blindness or willful ignorance displayed by Hayward of lessons that should have been learned by the previous, most-cited oil spill response failure, the Exxon *Valdez*. It is unlikely that Hayward was unaware of Exxon's public excoriation by the media, the public and government officials as the Exxon *Valdez* was legendary in crisis management circles as an abject failure that resulted in considerable regulatory and legal changes in the oil and gas industry.

While more visible and vocal than Lawrence Rawl, Hayward verbally employed many of the same strategies that produced angry reactions similar to what Exxon and its executives incurred in 1989. Hayward often utilized strategies of *denial*, *differentiation*, and *minimization* while BP's crafted apologia response strategies soon were focused on conveying *mortification*, *unity of purpose*, and *corrective action*. Ironically, Hayward is quoted in the official news releases conveying these same messages and strategies when his public comments contradicted the official corporate strategy. And while BP's use of *shared responsibility* and *unity of purpose*

was an attempt to show that BP was joining others in a common purpose (including the U.S. government which was critical of BP), some of Hayward's comments were similar to Rawl's in 1989 and reflected *scapegoating*. Both attempted to deflect blame, culpability and responsibility for the cause of the spill and to move responsibility for the cleanup onto others. Perhaps the most damaging unintended strategy of Hayward, and more damaging than Exxon's self-protection stance, was Hayward's *self-pity*. Statements like "what the hell did we do to deserve this?" and "I want my life back" were perceived as selfish and uncaring (similar to, but worse than, Rawl's silence and perceived lack of sincerity). Hayward's off-the-cuff remarks presented him, and subsequently BP, as being primarily concerned with how the Gulf oil spill was affecting BP and its officials and not the psychological and environmental harm the spill inflicted on so many Gulf residents.

Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl, in particular, was criticized for his failures with much of that criticism leveled at his silence or failed rhetorical response during the early stages of the crisis. Rawl's retirement in 1994 along with the fates of other executives once heralded but ushered out after crises and public relations failures had to be readily apparent to Hayward and other senior BP officials. An examination of the news releases issued by BP during the 2010 crisis, with statements attributed to Tony Hayward, suggests that BP's public relations team had learned important lessons from Exxon and other crises in the industry. As such, Hayward's repeated communication blunders throughout the Gulf oil spill disaster is as puzzling as it was damaging to BP and Hayward himself.

In addition to failing to learn from the Exxon *Valdez*, the contrast to Hayward's responses during the 2010 crisis and BP's response to the 1990 *American Trader* tanker spill off the coast of California are stark and add to the perplexity of Hayward's failures two decades later.

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Following the Exxon *Valdez*, BP created a crisis management department and BP America was cited as privileging collaboration and emphasized having good communication and was perceived to be forthcoming in utilizing all available resources to aid in the cleanup of the *American Trader* incident (Gellert, et al., 1994). Furthermore, BP assumed responsibility for the *American Trader* spill, which elicited positive framing of the crisis while still maintaining a protective posture for the company. BP America Chairman James Ross immediately assumed responsibility for the spill and its cleanup without differentiation or attempts to allocate blame elsewhere. This statesmanlike approach, along with BP's swift reaction in 1990, was the opposite of Tony Hayward's reaction in 2010. Hayward's approach and communication strategy has been referred to as denial and blame-shifting and his infamous comment of "I want my life back" has been referred to by *The New York Times* as "the soundbite from hell" (Jaques, 2015). Unlike the Exxon *Valdez*, in which denial and blame-shifting strategy appears to be intentional or semi-planned from an organizational perspective, this dissertation and the work of other researchers (e.g. Choi, 2012; Wickman, 2014) demonstrates that Hayward's comments contradicted or undermined BP's planned crisis communication strategy. As such, these lessons not learned, particularly from a rhetorical and communicative perspective, are costly to a company and its top executives. As of 2016, the 2010 Gulf oil spill will cost BP an estimated $61.6 billion (Mufson, 2016). And, unlike Exxon's Rawl, Tony Hayward did not survive for four years after the spill (Rawl retired in 1993). Hayward was shown the door by BP less than three months after the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion.

An evaluation of the content of Exxon's advertisement campaign and executives' public statements during the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill crisis of 1989 and a comparison to official news releases from BP and comments of BP executives provides an interpretive analysis that expands

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on the existing theories of apologia advanced by Hearit (1994; 1995; 1999; 2006) and Benoit (1995; 1997; 2004). An examination of the content official crisis communication strategies and unprepared public comments resulted in the formulation of additional conceptual categories that can contribute to the apologia literature (Neuendorf, 2017). These additions to apologia encapsulate a more robust analysis of the entire communicative process during selected periods of these pronounced crises and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of companies' strategies during a crisis. Unprepared, unscripted or "off-the-cuff" remarks often are included in media articles and can become the focus of the reporting, preempting or overshadowing official strategy or prepared statements. Therefore, these comments are important for a contextual evaluation of a company's crisis communication strategies and their effectiveness during a crisis.

The initial communicative response by Rawl and other executives in the early period of the Exxon *Valdez* crisis was largely one of silence. This was followed by an array of Exxon officials and representatives producing a number of messages, some officials contradicting others, while other statements were in accurate or had incomplete information. As the company later initiated an advertising campaign that utilized strategies of mortification, corrective action, admission, shared responsibility and unity of purpose, Exxon executives produces a variety of disjointed apologia strategies. Most notably, the use of denial, bolstering, minimization and differentiation continued to produce messages that undermined the attempt of the advertising campaign to convey a sincere apology or an acceptance of responsibility. Only one executive during the period examined, Don Cornett, appeared to convey the same messages (with sincerity) produced by the multi-million-dollar ad campaign, one which attempted to alter the growing negative public perception of Exxon and its management of the *Valdez* crisis.

For BP during the 2010 Gulf oil crisis, the public relations team produced consistent messages during the periods examined in this dissertation. Twenty-three of its releases contained strategies of corrective action, eighteen that promoted a unity of purpose, thirteen that stated BP would compensate victims and costs associated with the spill, ten releases contained an admission of responsibility, and only two suggested strategies of minimization or bolstering. However, Tony Hayward's comments along with the gaff by Carl-Henric Svanberg contradicted the apologia strategies carefully constructed by BP's communication professional. Minimization, denial, and scapegoating were each uttered (and widely covered by the media) on two occasions each and differentiation once. Admission and mortification (two each), corrective action and shared responsibility (once), often useful in a company's efforts at altering media frames or influencing public perception more positively, were used sparingly or overshadowed by the other, more negative unintentional strategies. Hayward's use of self-pity on two occasions was perhaps most damaging and received considerable media attention.

As demonstrated by the comparative analysis of the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spill case studies, public comments by executives and CEO's during a crisis often contradict and undermine the planned apologia strategies implemented by a company's public relations professionals during a crisis. The two strategies that appear to inflict the most damage to an organization and its reputation during a crisis are silence and self-pity. Both undermine a company's attempt at mortification and the perception of sincerity that, coupled with the corrective actions taken by the company, are likely to be effective. This is particularly notable in the case of BP in which Tony Hayward was quoted in BP's official news releases as maintaining the apologia strategy employed by the company—only to then utter a comment that is contradictory to the objective and purpose of the company's crisis communication plan.

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Past, Present, Future: Crises Media Exposure and Time

References to past crises seem to reappear when major new events occur, reminding media writers and the general public of companies' past transgressions. Such events also raise issues as to whether legal, regulatory or other changes often made after crises were sufficient and whether an industry has learned from its own previous mistakes or the mistakes of others, particularly with crises of a similar nature or companies operating with similar functions and objectives. One way to assess whether corporate actors learn from their experiences is to examine and compare their respective performance in two similar events at different points in time (Sylves & Comfort, 2012, p. 77). Comparative analyses are used frequently not only in academic research but also as to provide a historical perspective by the media to relay the size, scope, impact and significance of an event.

The issue of when a crisis begins and ends is often discussed in the crisis literature. While many scholars have described crises as having life cycles (e.g. Coombs 2007; Fink, 1986, 2002; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996; Jaques, 2000, 2007; MacKenzie, 1994; Mitroff, 1996; Paraskev, 2006, Turner 1976, 1978; Vaughan 1990; Zyglidopoulos, 2003), less attention has been paid to how contemporary crises evoke references to, or memories of, past crises. This is especially important for the oil and gas industry which has been responsible for a number of prominent crises in the last few decades, among them the oil spills of the Exxon *Valdez* and the *American Trader*, and BP's Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion and subsequent 6 month-long discharge of oil. The industry and the companies within this space are consistently named among the least trusted corporations in the U.S. (Corso, 2010; Spangler & Pompper, 2011).

Interestingly, new accidents and spills frequently involve media references to past crises or references to other companies' crises. As such, an examination of the media attention given to

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more recent crises with a corresponding emphasis on those that preceded them is warranted and can answer the following question:

RQ$_2$:   Are the trends of media coverage of crises related to the media coverage of subsequent crises of a similar kind?

To answer this question, I will first make use of generic search tools using the popular search engines *Google* and *Yahoo*, using the business and information database *LexisNexis* and by examining search results using the media database *Access World News*. In doing so, I will examine and evaluate the number of references or articles for the three crises discussed in this thesis: the Exxon *Valdez*, *American Trader*, and BP Gulf oil spill. Next, I will examine the amount of coverage per year for each crisis from the onset of the crisis to the current year. Last, I will examine the frequency that the crises discussed here are referenced or mentioned with each to determine whether like-crises are linked via media references.

Discrete Search Engine Results

The internet provides users with immediate informational access to events past and present. As such, users such as the public, media and academic researchers, can easily retrieve information regarding a contemporary crisis as well as obtain information on the company which may include prior crises of which they were involved. Furthermore, since media often reference historical crises involving other corporations involved in similar crises, the information available through various search engines and databases offer users the opportunity to examine the circumstances, impact and media coverage associated with crises that may have occurred many years ago. With the advent of the technology age, vast amounts of information and data can be stored, retrieved and shared instantaneously and disseminated through various channels.

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Sources and information obtained by the public through the internet has grown exponentially. Every day, more stories become available and are archived and searchable for longer periods of time; this reflects an explosion of journalism on high-interest stories (Tewksbury, 2003; Van Der Haak, et al., 2013). A comparative analysis of similar crises and the information available on crises in the oil and gas industry is important to researchers and businesses due to the industry's unpopularity (Cano, 2009; Spangler & Pompper, 2011), the prominence of media coverage of disasters and organizational crises (Birkland, 1997; Castello, 2010; Kleinnijenhuis et al., 2015) Tambini, 2010), the speed and immediacy that characterize news production and consumption (Kautsky and Widholm, 2008), and that changes in current oil exploration have increased the risk for a reoccurrence of major spills (Jernelov, 2010). These factors, along with the fact that past crises often are referenced in news and other sources during a new crisis (Bimber et al., 2013; Perrons, 2013) suggests the value of an examination of the amount of news stories and information available through the internet. More precisely, in terms of media coverage and public attention, oil spills such as the Exxon *Valdez*, the *American Trader* and the BP Gulf oil crisis warrant an examination and are likely to reveal interesting trends and correlations.

An internet search using the terms "American Trader oil spill 1990" produced 261,000 results on the search engine *Google*.[1] The "Exxon *Valdez* oil spill" generated 1,120,000 results through the same search engine while the "BP gulf oil spill" produced 896,000 results. Using the search engine *Yahoo* yields additional, albeit similar, results. The "*American Trader* oil spill 1990" yielded 31,200 results while "Exxon *Valdez* oil spill" generated 596,000 results and the "BP gulf oil spill" produced 3,700,000 results (August, 2017). The search engine results demonstrate the volume of information regarding these crises and this information reemerges as

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citations for research, background or comparative analyses in research and for public interest and consumption.
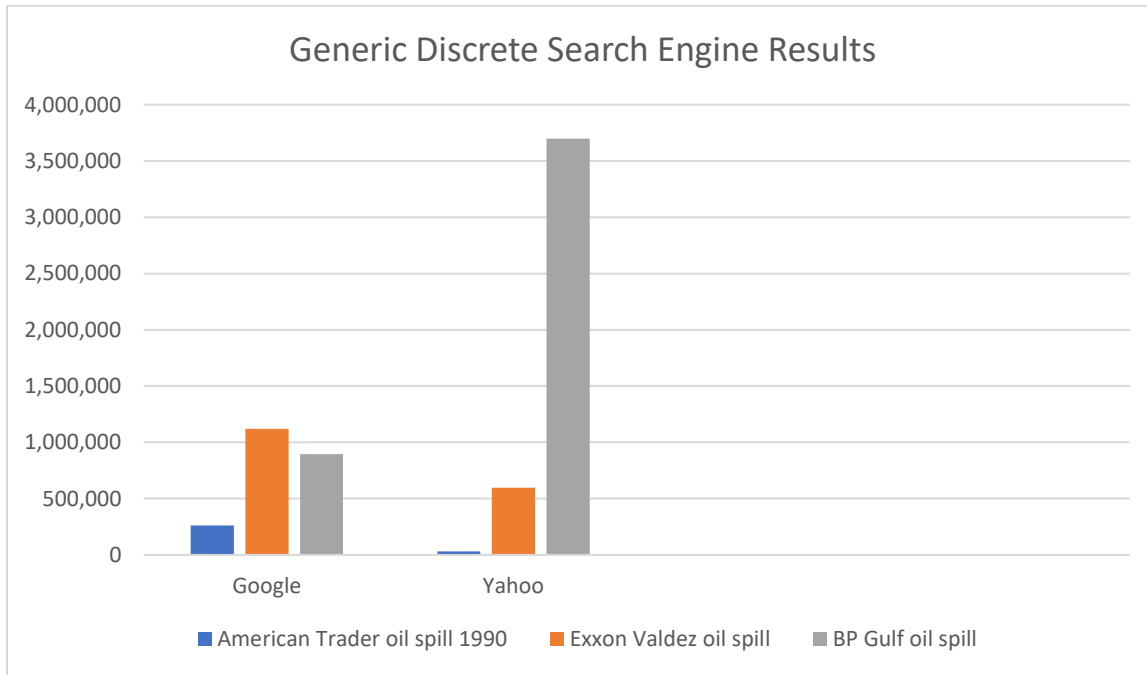
Figure 1. This chart demonstrates discrete search results using two of the most popular search engines, *Google* and *Yahoo*, for the *American Trader*, *The* Exxon *Valdez*, and the BP Gulf oil spills.

These results demonstrate the on-going exposure these crises receive when people seek more information regarding any of these human-induced environmental disasters. They also provide a close to permanent database of information available, information that can be immediately retrieved for historical or comparative purposes during future oil, gas or environmental crises, and can be referenced in future events. The results also show perceived levels of importance ascribed to these events by the availability of the content. Figure 1 shows that a *Google* search yields nearly as many hits for the BP Gulf oil spill after only seven years has passed as it does for the Exxon *Valdez* which occurred twenty years prior. *Yahoo*'s available sources are nearly seven times greater for BP's Gulf of Mexico spill than it shows for Exxon's.

While some results may be attributable to varying algorithms used by the two major search engines, both show the prominence or trending prominence of the BP Gulf oil spill over the Exxon *Valdez* spill along with the amount of information publicly available and easily accessed for future reference or discussion.

In addition to increased magnitude of the Gulf spill, BP's media and public exposures also were impacted by the increase in communication vehicles, such as the internet and social media. This technology was not nearly as advanced or widely utilized during the time of the Exxon *Valdez* disaster. The increase in interactive communication and the ability to access and share information has resulted in a hyper-media environment in which news is produced rapidly and diffused instantaneously throughout the world. Some have suggested that news itself can be regarded as an innovation (Koopmans & Vliegenthart, 2011; Roger,1995) and research has consistently shown that the internet functions as a supplement to traditional news (Kim, 2008, p. 614). The combination of access to a multitude of media and other sources and social media platforms that allow users to share news and opinions exemplifies the hyper-information environment that surrounds contemporary crises and pose new challenges for companies and organizations in their identification of an emerging crises and in their crisis management efforts.

The prevalence of social media usage presents new challenges for companies to scan for potential crises and implement an effective crisis communication strategy, along with transitioning their responses based on public perception. Internet users now have the capacity to aggregate existing media and link it within a library-like network of information which allows other users to retrieve and share that information (Bruns, 2003). Furthermore, the internet enables users to spread their criticism of crises events and the companies involved and allows

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them to bring those criticisms back into conventional media spaces (Carr, 2012). The sharing of news and information can, and does, impact the public's perception of a company.

Contemporary crises receive far more attention and are instantaneously disseminated across populations, with social media providing a platform for stakeholders to express their views on the crisis and the company or companies involved. Therefore, today's organizations need to be proactive and respond to a crisis quickly, frequently and factually to influence media coverage in both mainstream and social media during an oil spill (Chilvers et al., 2016; Starbird et al., 2015; Walker et al., 2015). In addition, organizational mistakes that used to take news cycle of twenty-four hours or more through traditional media in past crises are now visible within hours or less through the internet—as the public response spreads immediate through social media platforms. This also involves far more visual images available to the public through news video feeds or pictures or video streams from everyday citizens with a smart phone. The attention given to a contemporary crisis is immediate, continuous and much more widely disseminated that crises a decade or more ago.

Discrete Search Results in Major News Repositories

In addition to social media and information sharing, the expansion of technology has allowed people far greater access to news sources and other bases of information. Databases provide repositories of information that can be accessed long after an event has occurred. These information warehouses compile and produce information sources that were not available for crises that occurred prior to the creation of and reliance on the internet as a primary source of information and data. This also increases the exposure and diffusion of stories and information regarding major crises and establishes a permanent record for users, media and scholars to retrieve data of prior crises as a reference or contextual lens from which to view a contemporary

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crisis. For Exxon, the information age has allowed for the compilation of readily-accessible

sources of information not readily available or as easily accessible during the Exxon *Valdez*

crisis. This is particularly relevant for people searching for information or news on issues who

were not alive in 1989 or too young to remember the magnitude of the crisis and its impact.

Furthermore, the data and information available on the Exxon *Valdez* and the *American Trader*

provide the media access to past crises past for inclusion in contemporary stories regarding oil

and other industrial accidents. Mechanisms that cause individuals to focus on similarities and

compatibilities influence perception (O'Connor, 2011).

LexisNexis

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, media sources and the means of news and

information dissemination was far more limited than in 2010 when the *Deepwater Horizon*

exploded. Prior to the internet and data systems with large storage capabilities, most resources

were available only through a review of sources at a local library or in archives and files of

media companies. However, some companies and organizations now specialize in the

compilation of various information, including large databases of media stories that span decades

and allow users or members access to their repositories. One source of news sources and

information on the three oil spills examined here is *LexisNexis* "a leading global provider of

legal, regulatory and business information and analytics" (https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-

us/about-us/about-us.page). This company stores historic data and information and allows for

the retrieval of archival news stories of interest to businesses, the public and researchers.

A search of the *LexisNexis* database indicates the distribution of news related to the

American Trader, Exxon *Valdez*, and BP Gulf oil spills. A search for each crisis in their

database shows generally consistent trends in what forms of media produced the most

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concentrated coverage on these spills. For all three disasters, newspapers provided the most news sources. This is particularly interesting given the advent of the internet and its pervasiveness that, for most people seeking information today, newspapers—or online news sites, continue to generate the most stories. A necessary distinction is newspaper stories are now disseminated and shared through different means than the time of the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader*.

For the Exxon *Valdez*, newspaper sources dominated the results (907) followed by industry trade press outlets (161). These sources constitute the bulk of the information available through *LexisNexis* on the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill crisis. The importance of this is that regulatory changes and legal proceedings almost always follow a crisis and, therefore, ensure that the crisis and the company involved will be reported in future articles after the crisis has subsided. What is interesting, however, is the comparatively low number of citations (12) in law reviews and legal journals, considering the regulatory changes and legal challenges which ensued following the Exxon crisis. This may suggest that such impacts were covered in more traditional, mainstream media sources and diffused further given the magnitude of the event and the level of public interest.
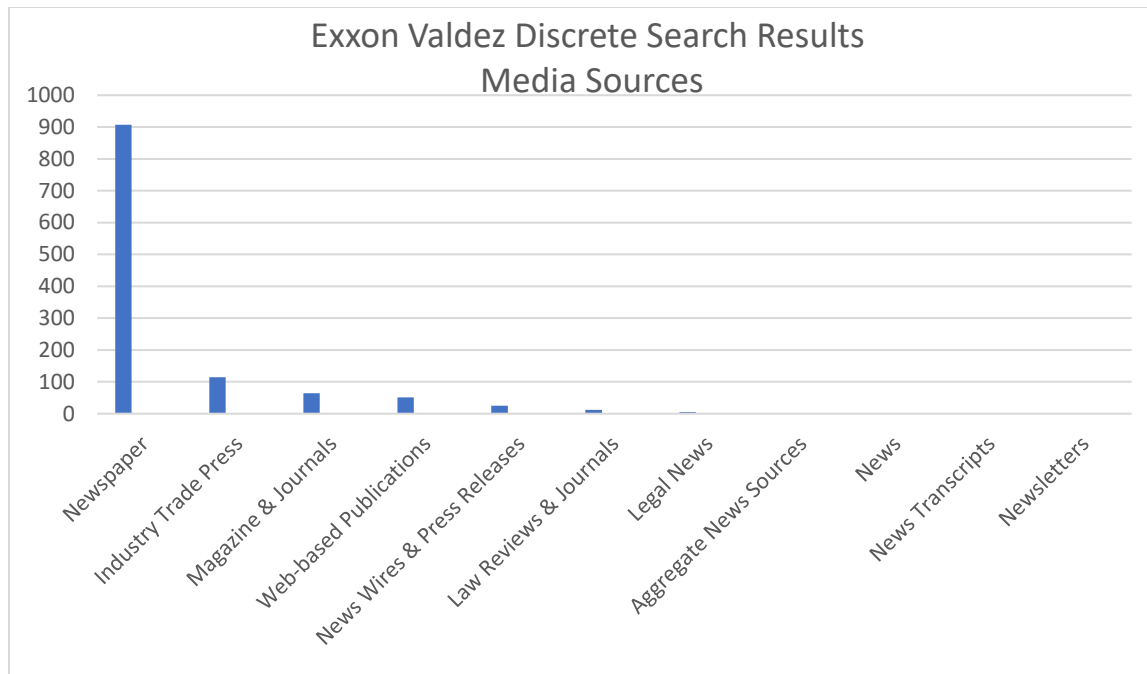
Figure 2. The chart above reflects news sources (1182 total) of media exposure distributed across news mediums as complied by *LexisNexis* for the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill.

Figure 2 demonstrates the high concentration of newspapers as the dominant media source reporting on the story of the Exxon *Valdez* disaster. This coincides with and supports Exxon's decision to concentrate its public relations and damage control through newspaper advertisements. Rather late in the crisis from a crisis communication perspective (ten days), Exxon ran full page ads in 166 newspapers apologizing for the spill (Elliott, 1989; O'Hara O'Connor, 2011). Whether this influenced the amount, framing or content orientation of the coverage is unclear, given the slow response to the disaster and CEO Lawrence Rawl's initial reluctance to speak on the issue and his lackluster performance when he did. It does, however, demonstrate Exxon's awareness of their public relations problem not long after the onset of the crisis, and the need to use newspapers as the primary medium for communicating to the public and various stakeholders. Its efforts, however, to contain, limit, or repair damage to their corporate image were too late and poorly coordinated to be highly effective. Conversely, one

could argue that their criticism of Captain Hayward's alleged drinking problem may have shifted some of the focus away from the company's planning and response defects (Fearn-Banks, 2007). This individualized the causation as attributable to human error and the fallibility of a single person and not systemic failure on the part of the corporation. Yet, had Rawl appeared early and spoken effectively, the visual imagery (television) and printed versions of his statements, which should have conveyed concern, responsibility, and sincerity could have lessened the negative impacts and perceptual damage on Exxon. However, a year after the spill, Rawl gave an interview where he expressed how harrowing the experience had been for him and expressed bitterness and frustration that the public had refused to accept Exxon's apology (Behar & Rawl, 1990). This self-pity messaging would be repeated twenty years by BP CEO Tony Hayward during the BP Gulf oil spill crisis of 2010.

As already noted, less than a year after the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill disaster, British Petroleum encountered a similar crisis off the coast of California when the *American Trader* oil tanker ran over its anchor. While far smaller in size, the oil spill also impacted local communities and the pristine beaches highly coveted in California for residents and tourists. A search of media sources on the *American Trader* spill in *LexisNexis* results reflect a wider distribution of news stories across mediums following the spill. These sources also reflect how many locally-generated news stories are transmitted to a wider audience and that, although California has many media outlets often picked up nationally, the overall coverage of the *American Trader* disaster was relatively low in comparison to the Exxon *Valdez* which preceded it (roughly one-third). Like the *Valdez*, most stories were generated in newspaper articles (168) and law reviews and journals (129).

An interesting and important consideration is a counterfactual perspective. Had the Exxon *Valdez* spill not occurred with such attention and magnitude, would there have been higher levels of coverage and greater national or international exposure? Simply put, British Petroleum may have been fortunate that the Exxon *Valdez* spill had preceded it and, therefore, a smaller spill was viewed as less newsworthy or of interest primarily for local audiences and news outlets. A second consideration is the overall effectiveness of British Petroleum not only in their physical response to the spill but also their effectiveness in their crisis communication. Similarly, if British Petroleum had repeated the mistakes made by Exxon in 1989, the media coverage may have been more pervasive and expansive, increasing public awareness and changing the perception of the company and its ability to manage a crisis.
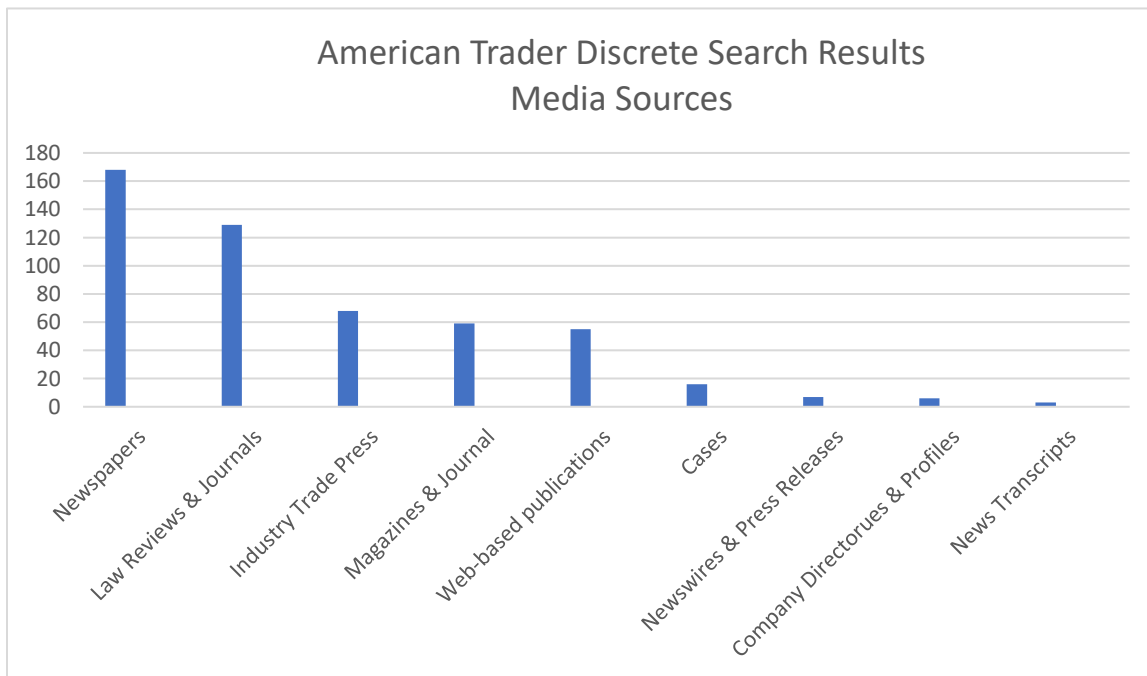
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Figure 3. The chart above reflects news sources (335 total) of media exposure distributed through news mediums as complied by *LexisNexis* for the *American Trader tanker oil spill.*

While the size of the *American Trader* spill was much smaller in comparison, given the active media presence in California and the state's long tradition of strict environmental policy, the results also may indicate something additional. British Petroleum was lauded for its pre-crisis preparation and good communication during the *American Trader* crisis as well as the media cited as being helpful in communicating important details of the spill to the public (Gellert, et al., 1994). British Petroleum's management of the *American Trader* spill, as reflected in some media accounts and public statements, was perceived in contrast to the perception of how Exxon managed the *Valdez* spill the year before. The two crises that occurred close in time reflects the importance of effective communication during a crisis, something British Petroleum had done well and where Exxon clearly failed. As suggested in this dissertation, had the spills not occurred so close together in time and had British Petroleum not reacted promptly and implemented an effective crisis communication response, the *American Trader* spill may have received more media coverage.

Conversely, of the 991 sources listed through *LexisNexis*, 832 were newspapers articles on the BP Gulf oil spill, again, showing consistent trends of the primary news sources like the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader*. The results demonstrate that news is still primarily generated through traditional journalism; however, its means of dissemination have changed. During the BP Gulf oil spill, people were actively seeking information online about the spill and the blown out well (Starbird et al., 2015; Walker, et al., 2015). Organizational crises, particularly large corporations in industries with low approval ratings, generate news and negative opinions on oil spills are often influenced by information people receive from media sources (Chilvers et al., 2016). Tony Hayward's comments added to the negative public perception of the spill and served as a "priming" mechanism for journalists as they reported on

the spill. Priming is an important effect in public reaction to a crisis and crisis communication strategies because it confirms that people do, indeed, absorb information from news stories and use it to guide subsequent thinking about an event or those involved in it (Graber, 2004).
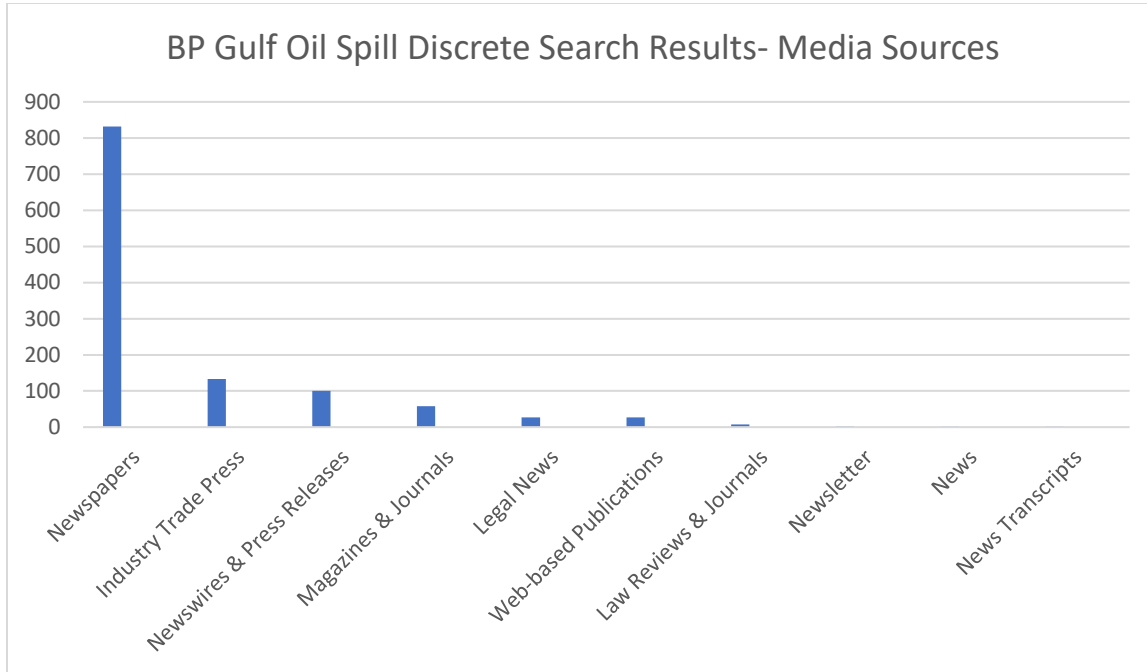
Figure 4. The chart above reflects news sources (991 total) of media exposure distributed through news mediums as complied by *LexisNexis* for the BP Gulf oil spill.

Interestingly, while newspapers continue to be the dominant source of news generation, the ratio to industry and trade press is less than the previous crises examined, the Exxon *Valdez* and the *American Trader*. The amount of coverage of the BP Gulf oil spill through newspapers may be reflective of both the magnitude of the event and the ability of modern media to generate and disseminate stories easily due to modern technology. The spill also evoked considerable public attention which helped drive the media coverage. With the loss of lives and livelihood, the BP Gulf oil spill became both a human-interest story as well as an environmental damage

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story. The public became interested in the crisis earlier than the media did and the remained fascinated longer than the press (*Pew Research*, 2010, August 25). The changes in how information is obtained and disseminate also increases the attention given to a crisis as news is now immediate and continuous and social media allows for the public to share their views regarding crises and media coverage of the event.

Access World News

In addition to *LexisNexis*, *Access World News*, provides another resource for information and news sources regarding oil spills. *Access World News* is an archival database of news and information sources that is "the world's largest repository of reliable information" and full text articles from over 4500 U.S. and international newspapers, wire services, and broadcasts (www.NewsBank.com; http://libguides.wmich.edu/az.php?a=n). Like *LexisNexis*, *Access World News* provides a news source database with a particular focus on news stories that include international news and transmission. *Access World News* is a very comprehensive database that includes international news sources with millions of news articles (Perez-Stable, 2017).

A search of *Access World News* by dates offers additional insight on media coverage with time as a variable of the Exxon *Valdez*, *American Trader* and BP Gulf oil spills. The three crises examined in this dissertation were separated by time intervals of occurrence ranging from eleven months and fourteen days (the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader* spills) to twenty-one years and twenty-seven days (Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spill). The media exposure by year of the spills was examined to determine any trends in coverage from the year the crisis erupted to the present year. This examination allows for researchers to determine the correlation or influence time has on the media coverage for the respective crises and to see if there is any relationship in media coverage and exposure with crises that occurred previously.

From March 24, 1989, when the Exxon *Valdez* struck the Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, Alaska through February 6, 1990, the day before the *American Trader* oil tanker spill, there were 9,613 articles found on *Access World News* regarding the Exxon *Valdez* spill. During the same time frame after the *American Trader* ran over its anchor off the coast of Huntington Beach, California, *Access World News* produced 646 news reports on the California spill. This shows that coverage of the Exxon *Valdez* was roughly fifteen times than that of the *American Trader* oil spill.

In 1990, there were 8,974 articles in *Access World News* on the Exxon *Valdez* and 640 on the *American Trader*. That same year, the two disasters were mentioned in the same article or news report 180 times. The linkage of the *American Trader* spill and Exxon *Valdez* plunged to merely sporadic coverage after 1991. While future references to the *American Trader* crisis dropped precipitously and the coverage of Exxon's Alaskan spill dropped as well, the Exxon *Valdez* was still the subject of or referenced on average in approximately 1300 articles per year for the next thirteen years and increased consistently to over 2,000 per year after 2005.

Media Exposure: Trend and Time Analysis

Individual crises typically peak in media coverage during the first year of the crisis[1]. This suggest some form of resolution as well as a maturation or decay in society's collective awareness. The trend is generally consistent, particularly in crises of oil spills, with some spikes in references made during subsequent crises. "Old news" in the technology age means that it is not forgotten, it is simply archived only to be brought back in future coverage and often referenced to when crises of a similar nature arise. This, coupled with academic sources and

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[1] Exceptions are conflicts or humanitarian disasters, such as war or ethnic conflict, political disputes or famine that evolve or are sustained over time and not easily resolved.

information banks, keeps "old news" alive and ready to live again in the public discussions when it is deemed relevant or important. In other words, a past crisis an organization has largely put behind it and returned to their normal operations rises again when they or another organization endures a similar occurrence. The significance of past events within the context of the present can be facilitated by an analysis of references to past events and in so doing provide a useful point of comparison (Knight, 2012, p.350).

The selection of which crises to include as points of reference involves the framing of a crisis based on cultural values to define a problem, evaluate causal agents and predict the outcomes of treatments toward the problem (Entman, 1993, 2007). Journalists view framing as a means of generating ideas for news, offering context and determining what information to include and exclude (Tankard, et al, 1991). For the oil and gas industry, the continued debate over the environment and the unpopular view the public has of the industry allows for framing and the priming of the audience's perception to illicit or feed the public's interest. Reminding the public of the hazards associated with oil and gas exploration and transportation with references to past crises feeds the existing narratives involving the public debates and provides villains for public scorn and criticism as responsible of the damage done.

A search of *Access World News*, shows the annual distribution of news associated with selected oil spill crises. The trend of crises referenced in news reports, both individually and in conjunction with other crises yields interesting results that warrant further analysis. For example, in all the cases reviewed, the Exxon *Valdez*, the *American Trader*, and BP Gulf oil spills saw dramatic drop-offs in media citations the year following the crisis. However, each saw spikes in subsequent years either from activity regarding settlement payouts, lawsuits, changes in regulation or, most notably, when another industry crisis or an event with environmental

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damages occurred. The public's attention to the mediated crises waned until some event increased the amount of coverage and reminded people of the previous crises and their impact. Prior to the BP crisis, the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill was the worst recorded oil spill in American history (Choi, 2012, p. 423).

The Exxon *Valdez*

The Exxon *Valdez* incident resulted in 8974 articles in 1989 according to *Access World News*. The year of the crisis was the peak of coverage for twenty years. Media sources for the Exxon *Valdez* dropped the following year, although at a smaller rate than the *American Trader* or the BP Gulf spill (33%). The coverage leveled out after 1989 to approximately 2,000 articles per year until 2010; however, increases in references to the crisis did rise after 2005. While reduced from its high point in 1989, the consistent referencing of the incident for twenty years does demonstrate some consistent input regarding the crisis placed in the public consciousness via the media. From a reputational or brand perspective, this suggests that the crisis never really went away; rather, its taint followed the organization for the next two decades.

What is most notable is that in 2010, during the BP Gulf oil crisis, articles referring to the Exxon *Valdez* skyrocketed, eclipsing the total number of media references it received during the apex year of the crisis (8974 in 1989, 13,563 in 2010). This represents an increase of 50% in news sources mentioning the Exxon *Valdez* during the BP crisis over the year of its occurrence. While some of this can be attributed to the wide use of the internet for news creation and dissemination, it does demonstrate that large crises that receive a lot of media attention are inextricably linked, even when separated by years. This raises the issue of whether the lifecycle of crises as described by some authors (e.g. Coombs 2007; Fink, 1986, 2002; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996; Jaques, 2000, 2007; MacKenzie, 1994; Mitroff, 1996; Paraskev, 2006, Turner

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1976, 1978; Vaughan 1990) is complete and accounts for the exposure given to a crisis when another one erupts years later. A key weakness of life cycle models is the presumption that crises are linear, one that suggest that developments take place in a sequential fashion, and ultimately lead to some form of resolution (Jaques, 2007). If widely diffused media and public attention to a crisis is a defining characteristic of a crisis and its phases then consideration must be given to the media's reminding or introducing a crisis to the public, even distally associated by time. This also reinforces the importance of effective crisis communication for an organization as it becomes part of the legacy of a company and ingrained in the narratives associated with future crises.
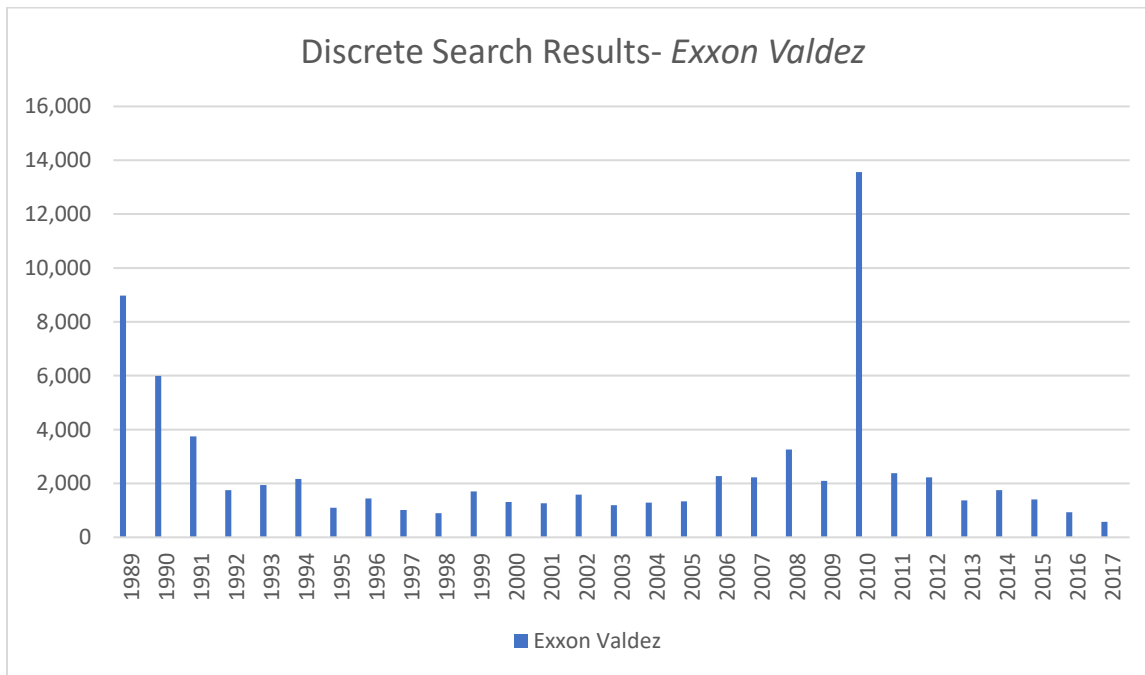

Figure 5. This chart represents news articles from the year of the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill to present year as compiled by *Access World News.*

As can be seen in Figure 5, the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill crisis has not disappeared from public awareness. *Access World News* shows consistent references to the spill for over twenty years after the incident occurred. Notable is the fact that the Exxon *Valdez* crisis resulted in such continuous media coverage for decades though it is not considered to be one of the top ten worst oil spills of all times (Cassleman, 2010). In fact, the Exxon *Valdez* received four times the media coverage than what is considered by most to be the worst oil disaster in modern history—one which occurred in 1991. During the Persian Gulf war of 1991, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein ordered retreating Iraqi soldiers to open oil pipelines from the Sea Island terminal in Kuwait and elsewhere. The action is estimated to have released 240 to 336 million barrels of oil into the Persian Gulf. Despite the magnitude and that it rates as the greatest discharge of oil in modern history, a search of *Access World News* yields only 2373 sources in 1991 for the Iraqi oil disaster as opposed to sources on the Exxon *Valdez*, which produced 8974 results after its occurrence in 1989. In fact, none of the top five oil spills listed by many sources (e.g. Cassleman, 2010; *WorldAtlas*; Zerkel, 2014) produce anywhere near the results that the E*xxon Valdez* generated in during the first year of the crisis, including the Ixtoc I well spill off the coast of Mexico in 1979 which spilled an estimated 140 million barrels of oil.

The high level of media coverage to the Exxon *Valdez* over other oil spills demonstrates that the media, particularly the U.S. media, has a strong influence in determining which crises rise and rank in prominence and are worthy of the public's attention (i.e. agenda setting by media gatekeepers). The coverage of oil spills in or near the U.S. receive far more media coverage than other large spills that happen around the world (Sharp, 2010). The public's interest in a crisis (or issue) is congruent to the amount of attention paid to it by media outlets, and the public plays a particularly large role in driving the media coverage on the environment (Anderson, 1991). And,

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like local coverage levels for some crises (i.e. the *American Trader* tanker spill), connections to crises are proximal where interests in them are based on the impact on the individual, regional or national levels (including psychological factors). Those most directly impacted will naturally have an interest in obtaining information about them, and the perception of a company's response may influence whether the stories arise from and remain in regional news outlets or are disseminated to wider audiences. Since the environment and oil spills elicit significant public and subsequent media attention, larger spills in which a company's management is viewed to have caused the crisis or failed to adequately respond will reach a larger audience.

The American Trader

Also of interest is the impact and effect of one crisis on another that occurs simultaneously or close to the time of a larger, more prominent crisis. To reiterate previous observations in this section, less than a year after the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska, the *American Trader* oil tanker, operated by British Petroleum Shipping Company, ran over its anchor off the coast of Huntington, Beach California on February 7, 1990. As demonstrated by a search of *LexisNexis* database (Figure 3), coverage of this spill was much less than the Exxon *Valdez*.

Congruent with the *LexisNexis* search results, a review of articles provided by *Access World News* demonstrates trends in coverage over time. The *American Trader* tanker spill saw a precipitous drop in media references after 1990. In 1991, there was a significant decline in articles referencing the *American Trader* from 640 in 1990 to 30, representing a 95% decrease. A review of the news stories generated from the spill shows that the *American Trader* oil spill was more of a regional media story and it quickly became a minimally covered story, averaging

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less than three references per month in the year following the event. Subsequent events in the region would generate more local coverage.

Like the results of the Exxon *Valdez* spill, the search outcomes show a correlation of media references to other crises, coupled with legal and/or regulatory issues arising after the spill. In addition to settlement and legal issues which resulted in increases in news references to the *American Trader* in 1995, 1997, 1999, and 2002, increases also were observed in 2002 and 2008 as results of other spills, such as the *Prestige* oil spill off the coast of Spain in 2002 and the *Cosco Busan* oil spill in November of 2007. The *American Trader* was also referenced 21 times in 2010 (a 400% increase from 2009) resulting from coverage of the BP Gulf oil spill crisis which erupted on April 20, 2010.
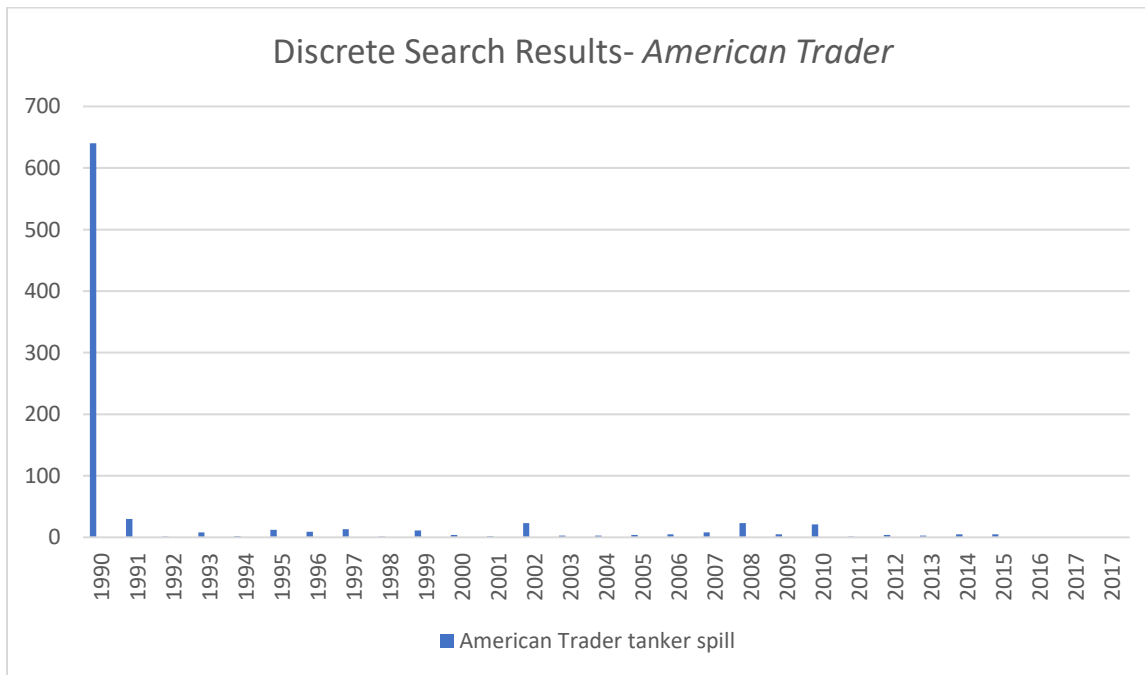

Figure 6. This chart represents news articles from the year of the *American Trader* tanker oil spill to present year as compiled by *Access World News*.

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An analysis of the trend of coverage on the *American Trader* over time shows a steep drop-off in news sources after 1990 from 640 to 30 in 1991 and an even steeper decline in subsequent years. Like the Exxon *Valdez*, the *American Trader* oil spill saw increases in source references in later years after legal or regulatory issues (1993, 1995, 1999, 2002) or during subsequent oil or related crises (2002, 2008, 2010). And, while the *American Trader* spill was much smaller than Exxon's—and British Petroleum was perceived at the time as being prepared (particularly in comparison with Exxon), litigation and additional spills in the industry resulted in media references to the *Trader* incident as well as risks associated with the oil and gas industry.

The BP Gulf Oil Spill

The BP Gulf oil spill was twenty times larger than the Exxon *Valdez* and five hundred times larger than the *American Trader* spill. When the Macondo well exploded on April 20, 2010, oil gushed from the damage well until it was finally capped eighty-seven day later. During that time, over 200 million barrels of oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico making the BP Gulf oil spill the worst oil spill in U.S. history, replacing the Exxon *Valdez* in prominence. The spill is also considered the second-worst spill in modern history (Cassleman, 2010; *WorldAtlas,* n.d.; Zerkel, 2014; Zielenski, 2010). Consequently, the amount of coverage of the BP Gulf oil was extensive. Unlike the time of the Exxon *Valdez*, technological advances and changes in media allowed for 24-hour coverage of the event, immediate access to stories and information regarding the event, and the ability for people to exchange information and opinions instantaneously with a global reach.

Adding to the public exposure and visual imagery of the catastrophe was BP's decision to place a camera near the damaged well—8,000 feet below the surface. The live feed of the oil gushing from the well was connected to U.S. Representative Ed Markey's Select Committee for

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Energy Independence and Global Warming on May 19, 2010, which, in turn, posted the feed on its website. Within 24 hours, over a million viewers had seen the feed and the demand was so high that the committee's and House of Representatives website crashed temporarily. "Spillcam" was a game-changer in the crisis and damaged the credibility of BP and contradicted comments of BP Chairman Tony Hayward (Jansen & Keller, 2010). As people were actively seeking information on the spill and the new era of technology allows for twenty-four-hour news coverage, the spill cam brought visual evidence that amplified the existing public concerns for the environmental and added to the negative media perception of the event (Hauffbaufer & Ramos, 2015).

The year of the BP Gulf oil spill crisis (2010) resulted in over 95,000 media references according to *Access World News*. This equates to ten times the number of media stories that were produced in 1989 after the Exxon *Valdez* incident. The number decreased to just over 21,000 sources the following year; this represents nearly an 80% drop in media coverage in 2010, a more pronounced decline than the Exxon *Valdez* incident observed in 1990 (33%). However, the total number of articles and other media sources available to the public on the BP Gulf oil spill in the year following the accident is still two-and-a-half times the number of references on the Exxon *Valdez* during the peak of the crisis exposure in 1989.

A search of *Access World News* shows trends consistent with the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader* oil spills. A steep decline in media coverage is observed in year one following the incident and a steady but more gradual decline in the years that followed through October of 2017.
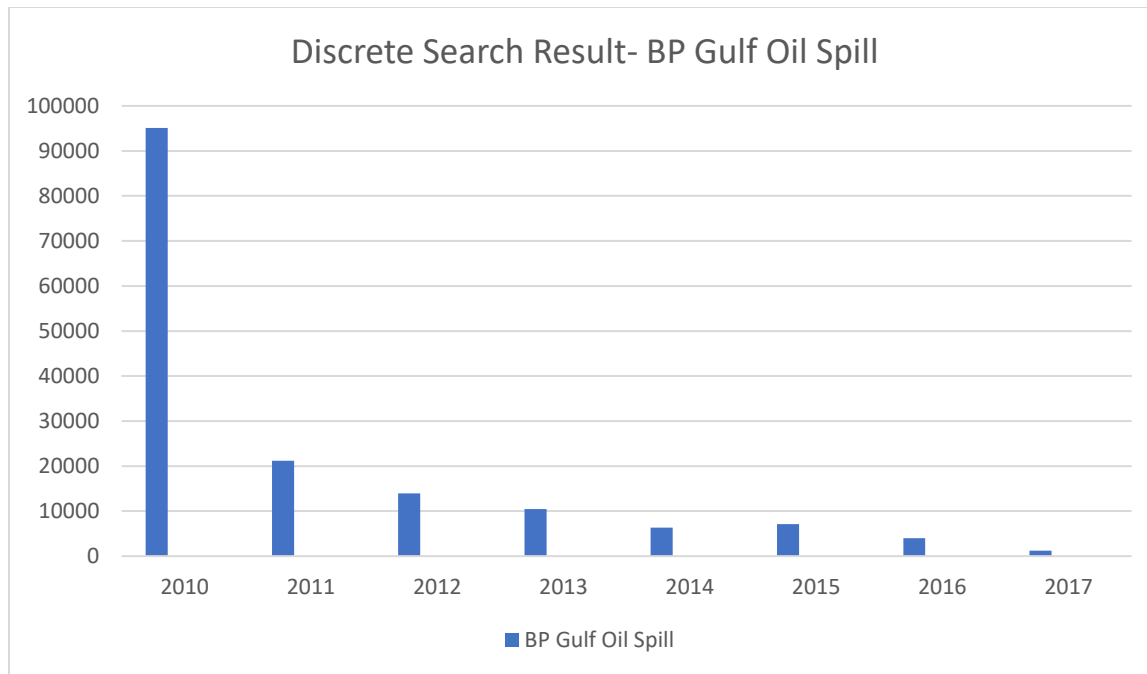
Figure 7. This chart represents news articles from the year of the BP Gulf oil spill to present year as compiled by *Access World News*.

As can be seen in Figure 7, a search of *Access World News* yields interesting results that indicate changes in crises coverage for contemporary crisis events. There are nearly four thousand media references indicated through *Access World News* for 2016 and over twelve-hundred so far in 2017 for the BP Gulf oil spill. The decline in references from the crisis apex of the BP crisis and Exxon *Valdez* crisis to present day is much sharper for BP than Exxon (98.8% decline in 2017 from 2010 for BP and 93.6% reduction for Exxon in 2017 from 1989). This significant reduction raises many interesting issues relative to crisis events, media exposure and the correlation with time. As of October 2017, there are still twice as many articles and news sources produced on the BP Gulf oil spill than the Exxon *Valdez*. However, during the same elapsed time (seven years) following the incident, the Exxon *Valdez* still resulted in 1437 media references in 1996, a decline of 84% compared to the nearly 99% reduction in BP references for the same period.

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Discrete Search Results for Academic-Based Sources

As the crisis literature has seen tremendous expansion since the Tylenol cyanide poisoning crisis of 1982, this research focused on divergent industries and business sectors. Research on oil spills has grown exponentially in recent years and increased interest from academia coincides with extensive media attention given to major events (Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative, 2017). Oil spill research is a rapidly expanding field with a growth rate greater than science and this is coupled with notable spikes following the Santa Barbara spill in 1969, the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spill respectively (Gulf of Mexico Research Initiative, 2017). This area of research entails such areas as environmental impact and cleanup technologies, legal, statutory, regulatory and oversight challenges, psychological and economic impacts of oils spills, and various areas of communication, most notably in the expanding area of crisis communication.

In addition to internet search engines, information repositories that compile press and media information along with research provide greater access and resources to researchers examining crises. A potential source of such information about scientific developments is the popular news media, which routinely report on findings that have been newly published in scientific journals. Researchers do appear to learn about scholarly findings through the mass media, at least occasionally (Kiernan, 2003). High-exposure media events also garner significant attention and highlight areas where researchers can contribute. In addition, companies involved in a crisis (e.g. BP) often provide financial resources to examine certain features or characteristics of types of crises along with government-funded studies and other monies that contribute to academic research.

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Along with the prominence crises play in modern society and the immediacy of the spread of news and information through technological innovations, which allows for comparative analysis and historical context that are useful in developing research plans and research proposals. Researchers from various disciplines have gravitated to the crisis field and the availability of data, information, and sources contribute greatly to the ability of scholars to further our understanding of crises and their impact on society. The multi-disciplinary nature of crisis management affords most disciplines the opportunity to contribute from their areas of expertise. This also encourages cross-collaboration between disciplines. The availability of sizeable numbers of media sources for a crisis or group of crises is often incorporated into research in conjunction with the works of other scholars. Research suggests an association between newspaper coverage of new scholarly research and scientists' subsequent citations of that research (Kiernan, 2003, p. 11). Research on crises, such as oil spills, therefore generate additional available sources and interest as the media report on a crisis and the academic work that results from it.

The trend of greater academic focus continues to expand significantly due to the size, scope and public and media attention that followed the BP Gulf oil spill. This increased focus by researchers further expands the diffusion and awareness of the crises through the various societal publics and continues to remind these publics of these crises. As such, consumers or seekers of information have additional resources to seek out or be exposed to continuous reminders of the spills and the organization or organizations linked to them. Subsequently, the publication of research findings often appears in traditional and electronic news outlets and furthers the dissemination of awareness as well as produces a reminder of crises after they have subsided, offered to interested publics in an easily-accessible database.

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Google Scholar

Google Scholar is a version of the *Google* search engine dedicated to academic research. This search engine leads users to articles, books, theses and dissertations, abstracts and court opinions, from academic publishers, professional societies, online repositories, universities and other web sites and helps find relevant work across the world of scholarly research (*Google Scholar.com*). The search engine is easily accessible to internet users and allows both consumers and researchers general access to a variety of scholarly work and other information. In addition to more general search engines that produce academic work and other sources of information, scholarly researchers and students have access to a variety of work through various databases, journals, and repositories accessible on-line or in-person through their university or college library. Many institutions of higher education share information with other institutions should the material not be available through their library. This allows researchers to obtain general information from news and other sources and narrow or focus aspects for research within the large domain of crisis management and crisis studies. The interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of crisis management allows for researchers to contribute from a variety of disciplinary perspectives.

Figure 8. This chart represents searches from databases that compile news sources and academic literature such as *Google Scholar.* Note- "*American Trader* Tanker oil spill" was also used for this search to filter unrelated items with similar features.

In addition to *Google Scholar*, many researchers and scholars from a wide range of disciplines have gravitated toward and now contribute to our intellectual understanding of crisis phenomena. A such, university libraries contribute to the dissemination of knowledge and awareness of crises as scholars, students and others use their resources for research, books, course papers and editorials. Academic contributions to the domain of crisiology have expanded greatly since the Tylenol cyanide poisoning crisis of 1982. With the continuous stream of high-profile crises across the range of public and private sectors impacting so many, the result will be a continual growth of academic sources and an expansion in the number of the contributors from various disciplines.

University Libraries

A search using Western Michigan's Waldo online library search engine demonstrates another means of analysis of the diffusion of the awareness of the three crises discussed in this work: the Exxon *Valdez*, the *American Trader* and BP Gulf oil spills. Western Michigan University (WMU), like most colleges and universities, provides users with an array of databases and other resources that provide access to immense amounts of information. WMU's library provides access to 500 databases, 800,000 e-books, 160,000 e-journals, 150,000 streaming audio/video files, 14,000 newspapers, 300,000 documents, 20,000 proceedings, data sets, dissertations, scores, and other materials (http://wmich.edu/library/ers). The compilation of sources in a university library's data systems adds to the amount of material available through search engines such as *Google* and *Google Scholar* and provides researchers and others with additional access to material. Those in academia contributing to crisis research can use scholarly resources in addition to media sources and, subsequently, add to the information available on various crises.

Of the 86,406 sources available on WMU's website for the BP Gulf oil spill and 40,636 on the Exxon *Valdez*, the search can also be narrowed to the 5,297 peer-reviewed articles on the BP spill and 8,082 peer-reviewed articles for Exxon's spill. Furthermore, academic-oriented sites allow for interested researchers to examine what work has been done previously on these crises and what areas may suggest additional research is needed, thus indicating that the body of academic sources available will continue to expand. As society becomes increasingly more complex and interdependent, organizations are much more likely to experience a crisis. This will also increase the need and demand for further research in the crisis field and necessitates the expansion of contributions from the academic community.
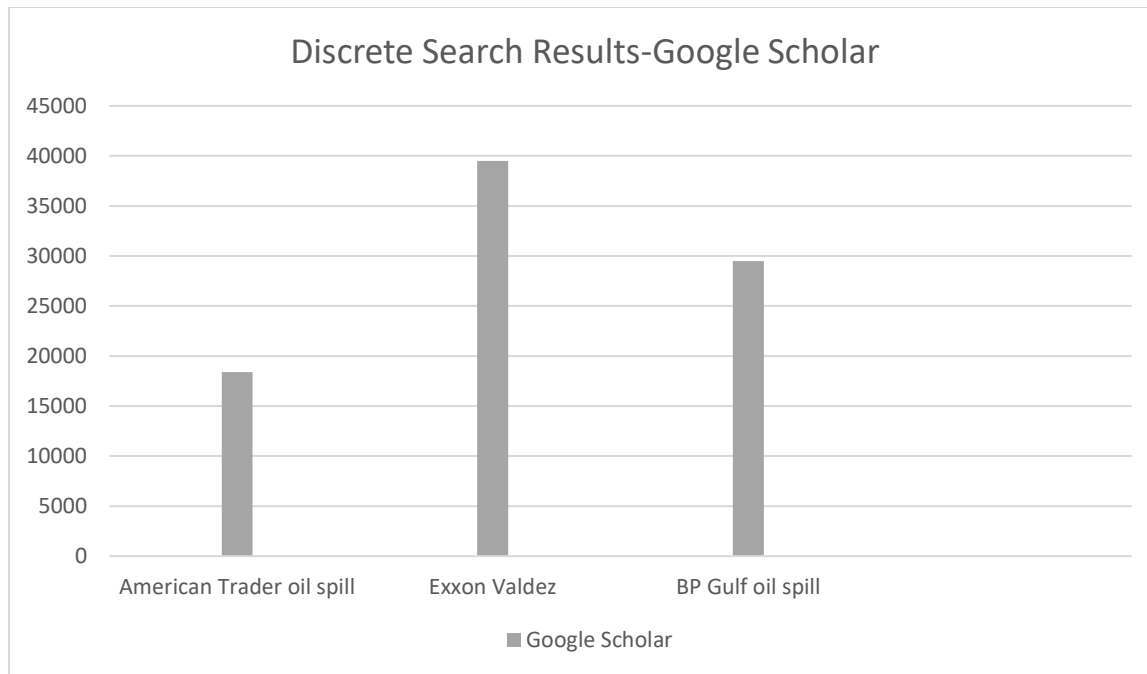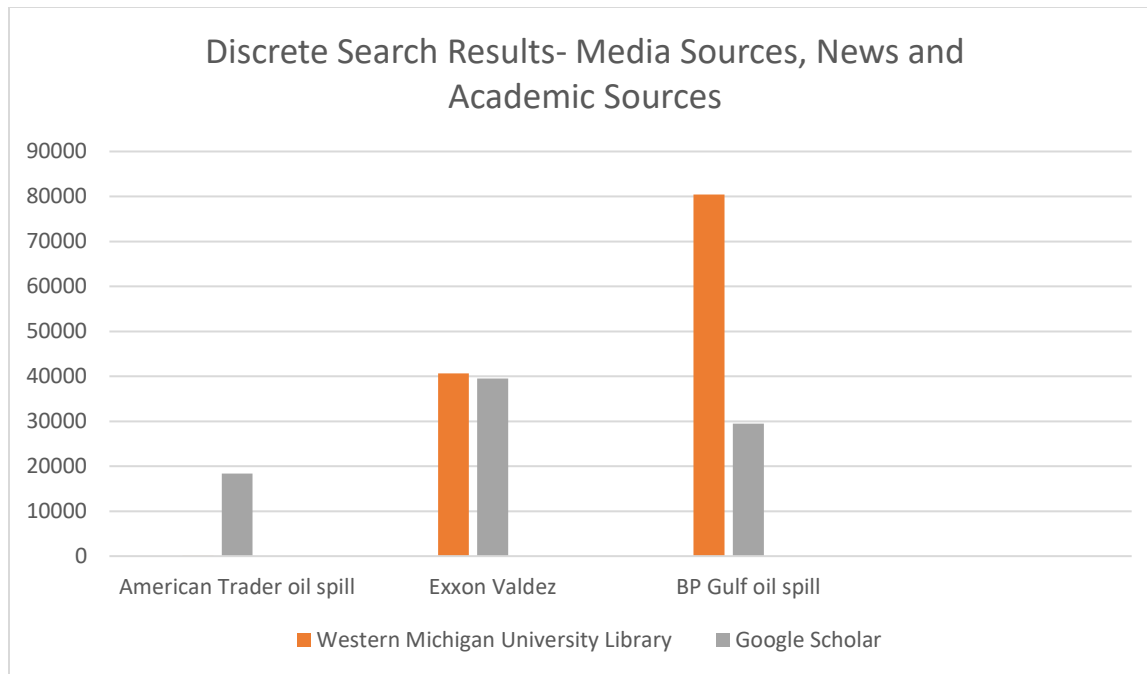
Figure 9. This chart represents searches from databases that compile news sources and academic literature such as *Google Scholar and Waldo Library at Western Michigan University*. Note- "*American Trader* Tanker oil spill "was also used for this search to filter unrelated items with similar features.

Figure 9 illustrates some interesting results when comparing search results from *Google Scholar* and Western Michigan University's library system. For example, while WMU provides nearly twice the results for the BP Gulf oil spill (80,406 to 40,636), the ratio of articles on the *American Trader* tanker spill is far more distinct. WMU's library system returns only 25 results while *Google Scholar* yields more than 18,000. While it is likely that the *Google Scholar* search included some results not related to the spill since the *American Trader* name produces items that contain the words in the search ("*American Trader* oil tanker spill" was used to narrow the results), the sheer volume relative to WMU's results suggest that there has not been a great deal of peer-reviewed academic work has focused on the *American Trader*.

The Linkage of Crises: Past, Present and Future References

As demonstrated by Figure 9, media references to the *American Trader* tanker spill dropped significantly after 1990 after the spill occurred off the coast of California with the

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second largest number of news reports occurring the following year (30). However, spikes in news references to the *American Trader* spill are observed in subsequent years when developments resulting from the spill or similar events arose. For example, references to the *American Trader* increased approximately 500% from 1995 to 1997 as result of oil spill disaster drills, additional reports of environmental impacts, and damages awarded due the spill. After a sharp drop in 1998 (1), 1999 references rose due to additional reports of damage awards, an important U.S. Supreme Court case regarding California's strict new oil tanker laws, and other human-made environmental disasters that arose that year. In 2002, 23 articles or news sources cited the *American Trader* incident when the AP wire noted the final settlement related to the incident along with references to another significant spill, the oil tanker *MV Prestige*, when one of its twelve tanks burst off the coast of Spain in 2002.

Media references to the *American Trader* dipped once again from 2002 until 2008 when it was mentioned in 23 reports after the container ship the *Cosco Busan* struck the tower of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge off the coast of California, spilling nearly 54,000 gallons of heavy fuel in November of 2007. This incident raised the issue of oil and fuel transportation safety once again as articles reminded readers once again of the *American Trader* mishap of 1990. Since the *Cosco Busan* spill occurred in California, references to the *American Trader* were logical. This fact, coupled with California's stringent environmental laws (which increased after the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader* spills) afforded the media the opportunity to remind the public of previous oil spills along with suggestions that oil and gas transportation procedures and emergency preparation laws may need additional measures to prevent repeats of similar accidents.

When the BP Gulf oil spill occurred in 2010, *American Trader* references rose to their second-highest highest levels since the spill occurred in 1990. *Access World News* produced 21 filtered results with references to the *American Trader* spill. As with the *Cosco Busan* incident, media reports included references to prior crises and regional outlets subsequently raised similar issues of safety along with calls for stricter industry and environmental laws and regulations. A spill near Santa Barbara, California in 2015, for instance, evoked four regional news stories mentioning the *American Trader*, suggesting that the recent spill served as "a more painful reminder of oil's legacy" (Tillman, 2015). The *Cosco Busan* incident is yet another example of the reflective nature of media coverage of crises and demonstrates that industry crises are analogized, particularly in the oil and gas sector.

Until 2010, the Exxon *Valdez* followed the trend of the *American Trader* incident with 8,974 news source references compiled by *Access World News* in 1989 and significant declines for the next two years (5989 and 3744 respectively). Although the trend of declining coverage followed a similar pattern as the *American Trader*, the reduced spotlight was more gradual for the Exxon *Valdez* crisis. The nature of the Exxon *Valdez* spill, where it occurred, the size of the spill, how it was mismanaged, and the prevalent media coverage during the crisis ensured that the Exxon *Valdez* legacy would continue to be discussed at some level for years to come. Like most crises, the *Valdez* saw a decline in media exposure in the year following the incident and a levelling off in references for the next several years. However, the crisis was referenced at a higher level in subsequent years when new crises in the oil and gas industry arose.

The coverage of the *American Trader* incident decreased by 95% from the year of the incident in 1990 to 30 media stories in 1991, while the Exxon *Valdez* disaster saw only a 33% reduction in stories in 1990 to 5,989 and 42% in 1991 from its two-decade peak in 1989.

However, like the up-tick witnessed by the *American Trader*, Exxon received significant increases during subsequent oil and fossil-fuel related incidents, settlement or fines assessed, and discussions or actions relatedly to regulatory or oversight changes to the industry. For example, when the *Prestige* burst a tank near Spain in 2002, the Exxon *Valdez* saw an increase of 26% in media coverage from 2001 to 1589 references in 2002. Similarly, the references to the Exxon *Valdez* saw an increase in source references in 2008 of 3,262 from 2,231 in 2007 (an increase of over 30%), a result of the Tennessee coal ash spill which occurred near the end of 2007.

Most pronounced for the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader's* subsequent media coverage was when the BP Gulf oil crisis erupted in 2010. The BP crisis resulted in a nearly 650% increase in articles for the *Valdez* from the 2009 coverage and a 400% increase in references to the *American Trader*. Due to the volume of articles in 2010 (95,067 for BP and 13,563 for Exxon), the crises were inextricably linked, considering that 2010 news sources for Exxon eclipsed the previous peak of 8974 articles in 1989, the year it occurred. This suggests that a spotlight on one major crisis can elevate previous ones as evidenced by the BP Gulf oil spill and Exxon *Valdez* being mentioned together in 9,294 articles (again this was more than the year the Exxon *Valdez* ran aground and received extensive coverage).

Due to size, impact and media and public exposure, the BP Gulf oil spill eclipsed the Exxon *Valdez* as the worst oil spill in the United States and the most sustained media covered spill in history (*Pew Research*, 2010; Sharp, 2010). From a crisis communication perspective, Exxon's CEO Lou Rawl and BP CEO Tony Hayward often were compared with regards to their inept responses to the crisis. While Rawl remained largely silent during the early weeks of the Exxon crisis, Hayward issued inaccurate assurances about the length of time it would take to resolve the crisis followed by several statements that angered the public and other stakeholders.

Since crisis communication is a vital component of the perception of successful (or unsuccessful) organizational management and that both CEO's were heavily criticized for their communication during the crisis, a logical extrapolation suggests that executives can exacerbate negative media coverage, public perception and impact the levels and tone of media coverage of the event.
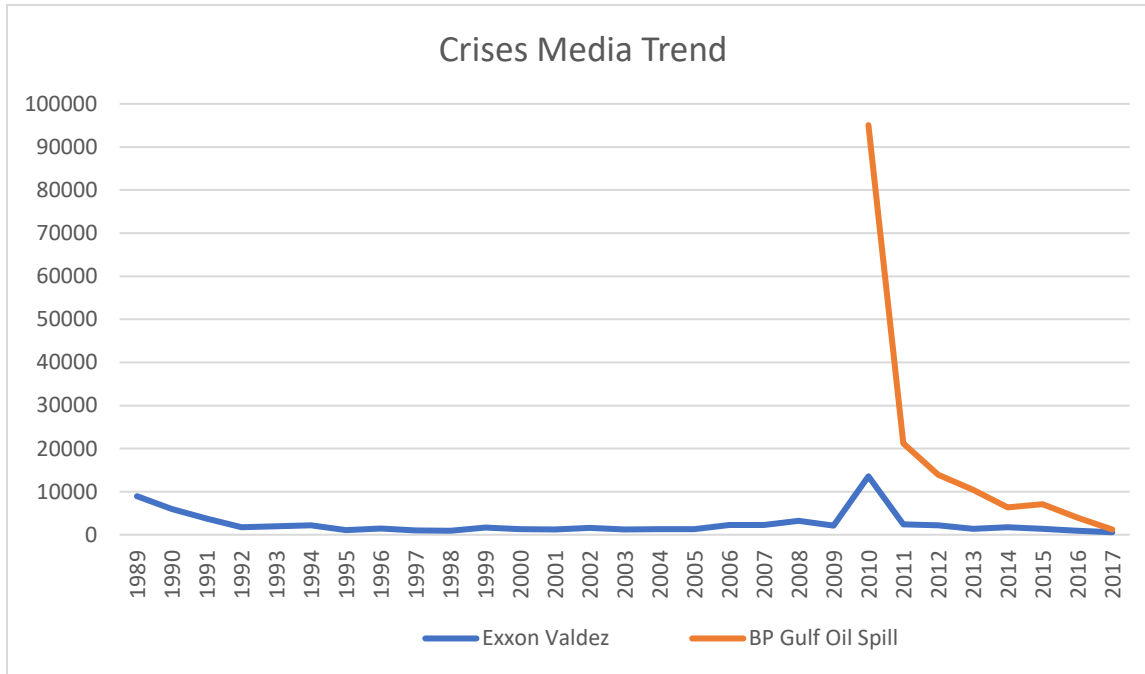
Figure 10. This chart shows the coverage of the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spills in relation to their origin and to each other over time. Source: *Access World News*.

Here Figure 10 shows that coverage or references to the Exxon *Valdez* saw a consistent decline after its peak in 1989. Spikes in coverage correlated to legal or regulatory changes along with other incidents used by the media for comparative purposes. For example, coverage of the *Valdez* saw a spike from 1,947 news stories in 1993 to 2163 in 1994—as a result in an assessment of a $5 billion fine for damages due to the spill and references to it from changes in insurance laws for tankers to cover spill damage and cleanup. The most pronounced jump for Exxon occurred in 2010 after BP's *Deepwater Horizon* disaster, exceeding the coverage it

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received in 1989 by over 4,000 more news references after the Gulf spill. Twenty years later, Exxon found itself involved tangled in a crisis not of its own making. In fact, the entire industry was impacted as subsequent legal and regulatory changes proposed or enacted by President Obama and Congress encompassed all oil and gas production for those operating under U.S. jurisdiction.

The results also show the magnitude in coverage given to BP's crisis relative to Exxon's, likely due to the magnitude of the Gulf oil spill and technological changes that makes news sources more vast, diffused and immediate. Furthermore, Figure 10 suggests that BP's coverage pulled Exxon's 1989 crisis into contemporary media and public awareness. The Exxon *Valdez* was referenced in 14% of the coverage associated with the BP Gulf oil spill. This again raises the issue of what crises are selected by the media to cover or compare with other crises, given the fact that the Exxon *Valdez* is not in the top ten of the world's worst oil spills. Exxon's 1989 crisis reemerged in the media as a point of reference for the BP Gulf oil spill—and served as a comparative vehicle for the media, public and researchers alike. Once again, the results indicate that a crisis that has long been mitigated does not necessarily mean it is over, given its future treatment by those in the media and academia. Therefore, the importance of effective management and crisis communication is of paramount importance at the time of the crisis since major crises are likely to remain in or emerge into the public consciousness when future crises arise that have similar features.

The referencing of a prior crisis with a new one is especially problematic if the company that was involved in a previous crisis finds itself enmeshed in another one. This can influence media coverage and public perception, particularly if past actions or responses were perceived negatively and the current response is also deemed deficient. However, the perception of

positive prior response can evoke criticism if that company had been viewed as acting responsibly in the mitigation of a prior one only to face criticism for mismanagement in a new one (e.g. Johnson & Johnson). This can raise issues as to what changes occurred within that organization that hindered the effectiveness of their contemporary response. For BP, its effective management of the *American Trader* accident in 1990 serves as a useful comparison for its poor response to the Gulf oil spill. Aided by the failures of Exxon in 1989, BP appeared to learn valuable lessons on how to manage an oil spill crisis. BP enhanced its success during the *American Trader* spill by continuous communication with stakeholders throughout the incident and by implementing apologia strategies that produced a positive perception of BP reflected by media accounts and government reports. What is notable is how poorly BP's CEO performed in 2010 given the experience of Exxon's executives during the *Valdez* spill and the many high-profile crises that impacted other companies prior to the Gulf oil spill.

Summary

The results of this analysis show the prevalence of media stories and information available regarding the Exxon *Valdez*, BP Gulf oil spill and to a much lesser degree, the *American Trader* oil spill. As expected, media coverage declines substantially after the first year a crisis occurs; however, the decline in coverage is much more dramatic than was anticipated. This shows that media and public interest in a crisis wanes significantly from the onset of the crisis into the following year. The resolution of a crisis appears to impact the decline in media coverage, perhaps more than mistakes made prior to or during a crisis. Increases in media coverage occurred in an approximately five-year time period after the crises subsided, typically as a result of settlements, fines and regulatory changes. What is particularly notable are the spikes in media references to these crises when subsequent oil spills or other environmental

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disasters occur. This demonstrates that crises are not removed completely from media coverage or the public's attention; rather crises offer a relatively stable source of media articles following their apex—and then rise again during other crises through references in the media. The connection between crises is established through media references and continues for years afterward.

The linkage between crises is most apparent in the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spill crises. The Exxon spill was the most consistently cited oil disaster for two decades. When the BP Gulf oil spill erupted and ended Exxon's reign as "the worst" and most covered oil spill in the U.S., articles that referenced the Exxon *Valdez* eclipsed the amount of coverage the spill received in 1989. BP's crisis in 2010 dragged Exxon's 1989 crisis back into the spotlight, reminded the public of the company's past mistakes and introduced the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill to younger generations not alive when the spill happened. BP's spill not only resulted in comparisons in the media, it afforded researchers prominent cases studies to examine, compare and add to the crisis management literature. References to the *American Trader* also saw a dramatic increase after the BP spill. While this can be expected since the same company was involved, BP's perceived success at managing the 1989 incident was noted as a stark contrast to its handling of the 2010 *Deepwater Horizon* well blowout. Furthermore, like more notable crises, such as the 1982 Johnson & Johnson Tylenol cyanide poisoning crisis, the *American Trader* crisis demonstrates that effective crisis management coupled with effective crisis communication strategies can enhance the reputation and image of a corporation. Similar to Johnson & Johnson, however, BP's failure to manage a subsequent crisis can eliminate any vestiges of positive perception or goodwill toward the organization for its past successes and produce negative media reports and

critical research—research that concentrates on the incongruity of a company's behavior with its values, resulting in challenges to its social legitimacy.

The results of this dissertation suggest that some crises are never completely removed from public attention. More pronounced crises receive continual coverage for many years after a crisis has subsided. The technological and information era has allowed for the archiving of "resolved crises" and the preparing for future dissemination of information regarding the crisis should the media or public feel its warranted. While the *American Trader* and 2010 Gulf oil spill involved the same company and, therefore, media reports often referenced both crises for historical context of BP's crisis history, the Exxon *Valdez* was referenced in more media articles during the BP Gulf oil crisis than during the *Valdez* spill itself. All three of these cases demonstrate the impact that statements and comments made during crises have on the perceived effectiveness of the company's crisis response. While the *American Trader* oil spill shows that BP learned from the many rhetorical and communicative mistakes made by Exxon executives during the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill, BP executives would undermine their own planned corporate apologia crisis communication strategies and add to the negative impact of the 2010 Gulf oil spill on those affected as well as on the company. The exponential increase in the means of communicating and exchanging information that now characterizes society and encircles modern crises also ensures that not only are the circumstances of a crisis readily disseminated, public perception of their resolution is influenced by the conduct and rhetoric of the leadership of the organizations involved.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

Most organizations will face a significant crisis at some point. The interconnectedness and increased organizational complexity that characterizes modern organizations along with changes in society have also increased both the probability and impact of crises or corporations. Much of the crisis management research today focuses on the technical aspects of dealing with crises (Penrose, 2000). Significant work on apologia (Hearit, 1994, 1995, 2006) and image repair (Benoit, 1997; 2004) have advanced our understanding on corporate crisis communication strategies. Remarkably, much of crisis management research is reductionist, and as a result, little research has been conducted to arrive a full picture of the interplay between corporate communication, the media, stakeholders, and mass publics during a crisis (Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2015) as well as dealing with evidence suggests that media reputation is a strategic resource (Deephouse, 2000). This dissertation seeks to bridge the research gap between formal and/or planned crisis communication strategies and those unscripted comments made by top executives (often during a news conference or on social media) during a crisis to determine the similarities and distinctions of apologetic strategies employed during a crisis.

Prominent examples continue to demonstrate failures in crisis planning and preparation and these failures are threats to an organization's reputation and viability. Further compounding these errors are the rhetorical mistakes key executives make when responding to a crisis. In particular, remarks from a CEO of a company can make or break the success of an outcome during a crisis (Harris, 1991). In the hypermedia environment of the 21st Century, characterized by the constant exchange of information and opinions through social media and the internet, news articles, tweets, and comments by "trolls" stoke the public anger that accompanies a crisis, particularly those involving loss of life or environmental damage. Controversial statements by

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top executives during a crisis undermine planned corporate crisis communication strategy and may perceptually negate successes a company with regards to its efforts to ameliorate the crisis.

Since corporate crises elicit high levels of public interest and media coverage, the perception of the management of the crisis by the corporation deemed responsible is one of the important impacts of the crisis on the organization. Oil spills are particularly of public interest due to their environmental impact and the preexisting unfavorable view the public holds toward the industry. As many researchers have noted (e.g. Benoit, 1995, 1997; Brammer & Pavelin, 2006; Chabria, 2013; Coombs, 1999, 2006, 2007, 2012; Coomb & Frandsen, 2010; Fearn-Banks, 2007, 2012; Freudenburg & Gramling, 1994; Hearit, 1995, 1996, 2006; Jaques, 2007, 2008, 2012; Lando, 2014) image repair is a vital component of effective crisis management and crisis communication and this is particularly important in large disasters, such as oil spills (Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2015; Koopmans & Vliegenthart, 2011; Lukaszewski, 1990). Oil company's crisis communication strategies, in conjunction with their crisis mitigation efforts to reduce negative environmental effects, are vital components in shaping the perception of their ability to manage crises, protect their reputation and maintain or rebuild trust with publics and stakeholders.

This dissertation has taken a two-pronged approach in order to examine the analogic crises of Exxon and BP. Specifically, it has examined the discourse surrounding the two crises, the spill of oil by the Exxon Valdez in Prince William Sound, Alaska in 1989 and the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, as well as provided a content analysis of the media and academic coverage of the crises, as well as accounting for the role of time – in order to understand media's framing of crisis events. This final chapter, Chapter V, will utilize this analysis in order to draw conclusions with regards to the nature of crisis management in the 21st Century. In so doing, this

dissertation examines the rhetorical strategies used by the companies involved in these crises, compares these strategies with the comments of top executives during the crises and draws comparative analogies with each of them. By using a third case in a limited capacity, the *American Trader* oil spill off the coast of California in 1990, this thesis also examines crisis awareness and perception sustainability by reviewing the amount and frequency of media coverage of each event, the amount of media coverage of the events over time, and the references made to each crisis in media sources in conjunction with each other. To accomplish this purpose, I first will summarize the findings of this dissertation; second, I will draw a number of conclusions and interpretations from these findings; third, I will propose directions for future research; and finally, I will detail some of the limitations of this study.

Summarized Findings

Leadership

Effective leadership is essential for a company engulfed in a crisis. Not only does it influence the organizational response to a crisis, top executives are also the face of the company to the public. As such, executives must present a consistent and effective communicative strategy throughout a crisis in order to maintain or repair the company's image which is usually damaged during a crisis. As the literature review demonstrated the "it-can't-happen-here" mindset or Mitroff & Pauchant's (1990) suggestion that companies feel too powerful to be seriously harmed by a crisis, this dissertation has shown that, when a crisis strikes, many executives respond in ways that make the public perception of the crisis worse. During the 1989 *Valdez* oil spill, Exxon exhibited *organizational hubris* throughout the crisis as reflected by the comments of several executives that further damaged its reputation and the public's perception of their response. BP, meanwhile, produced a more effective corporate communication strategy

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as reflected in their official press releases during the 2010 Gulf oil spill. However, the attempts to influence the public's perception of BP's management of the crisis were consistently undermined by its CEO. Whether from hubris or naivety, this dissertation has shown that the conduct and rhetoric of top executives can further damage the reputation of a company engulfed by a crisis and evoke an even stronger, negative response from the public and stakeholders.

Exxon's Discourse During the Exxon *Valdez*

During the Exxon *Valdez* crisis in 1989, Exxon's official or planned crisis communication strategy was virtually non-existent in the early stages of the crisis. As such, the comments of executives and spokespersons were perceived as Exxon's assessment and interpretation of the event. Most notably CEO Lawrence Rawl was silent for nearly a week into the crisis. Other executives and employees representing the company presented various strategies such as silence on key aspects of the crisis, similar to Rawls, and strategies of denial, and scapegoating. Statements of corrective action was also present but qualified and appeared to lack acceptance of responsibility for the cause of the oil spill or a full commitment to assume the costs of the cleanup.   The public retort to media questions and criticism also included minimization and differentiation even while promoting corrective action or admission regarding the size and impact of the spill. This defensive or legalistic response strategy would characterize their rhetorical strategies throughout the crisis as well continued privation of fully recognizing the harm caused by the incident or the negative public perception of Exxon that followed.

It was not until April 3, 1989, that Exxon embarked on an extensive and nation-wide advertising campaign as part of an official corporate communication strategy that attempted to alter or influence the increasingly negative perception of Exxon and its management of the crisis. Their advertisements, which included comments by CEO Rawl, incorporated strategies of

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admission, corrective action, mortification, shared responsibility, and unity of purpose. However, the silence of key executives at the onset of the crisis and the minimization and differentiation, which also included allocations of blame to others, impeded the effectiveness of their attempt to alter public perception more favorably toward Exxon. Had comments of acknowledging responsibility, statements that either were honest regarding the uncertainty surrounding the environmental impact (instead of minimization), and a sincere commitment of restoring the affected areas and compensating those harmed been produced early in the crisis and reaffirmed by top executives, the advertising campaign likely would have been more effective.

Further undermining Exxon's attempts at presenting themselves in a more favorable light through their public relations campaign were continuous comments by executives that attempted to blame others for the delays in containment and cleanup. While other entities such as Alyeska and the state and federal government had a share in creating the circumstances that created the environment for the disaster and the ineffective response, this was Exxon's ship, Exxon's captain and Exxon's oil. Rawl's testimony before Congress on April 7, four days after their PR campaign, further hurt their credibility and damaged their reputation. While strategies such as compensation, shared responsibility and unity of purpose (along with admission and mortification) can be effective, Rawl and others used these strategies as a defensive posture for the corporation and they came with qualifiers such as "I cannot accept liability ad infinitum where it goes in the world" (Clayton, 1989). This received a strong rebuke from members of Congress investigating the spill and his various comments that appeared to place blame and responsibility on others made its way into new stories around the country.

The days and weeks that followed Rawl's Congressional appearance continued to be negatively reported through the media. Exxon's discursive strategies, produced by several

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Exxon officials and spokespersons, continued to contradict Exxon's official strategies constructed in their advertising campaign. In addition to statements by officials such as Exxon Senior V.P. Ulyesse LaGrange who heralded Exxon's efforts at "a job well-done in the most difficult circumstances" which nearly every government official and local resident disputed, Frank Iarossi denied government claims that Exxon was not doing enough to clean up the spill and responded to questions as to whether Exxon should be embarrassed or ashamed with "absolutely not." By presenting or suggesting corrective action, credibility is grossly undermined if there is evidence to the contrary.

Exxon undermined its credibility by providing information the media, government and public found misleading, inaccurate or false. Credibility is key to the perceived effectiveness of crisis managers to reduce outrage. Since negative messages regarding the crisis receive more attention, extra pressure is on the trust building process so positive messages are effectively received (Zoetman, et al., 2010). Public trust had eroded in Exxon and their efforts of an advertising blitz to present the company in a more favorable light was undermined by questions of Exxon's honesty in their assessment of the crisis and their efforts at amelioration. Constant media reports of the existing damage and complaints by local residents and officials continued to produce a lack of trust between Exxon and stakeholders. Additional comments on April 23 and April 25 further eroded trust in Exxon. For instance, Exxon had suggested that nature and their efforts had disbursed much of the oil that was spilled, statements strongly contradicted by experts and government officials. This attempt at bolstering and differentiation continued to exacerbate the perception that Exxon was misleading the public, underscored when another Exxon official could not corroborate their claims. Last, CEO Rawl's attempt to explain his initial absence from the scene was an attempt at differentiation while suggesting some form of

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shared responsibility. His absence during the early days of the crisis was perhaps the most criticized aspect of Exxon's communication response and was a foreboding indicator of Exxon's failed communication strategy that followed. Rather than simply apologizing or acknowledging that he made a mistake by not going to the scene immediately, he tried to explain on April 30 that he thought it was more useful for him to "stay by the phone."

BP seemed to have learned from many of Exxon's mistakes during the Exxon Valdez disaster. A year after Exxon's crisis, the *American Trader* incident occurred off the coast of California. While smaller in scope, BP's reaction and communicative response clearly positively influenced the perception of the company and its management of the crisis. BP immediately assumed responsibility for the spill and the cost of cleaning up the ocean and beaches. In addition, BP worked closed with local and federal officials and communicated with stakeholders and the media regularly. Their updates and the information provided were accurate and BP appeared forthright on the cause and impact of the spill. BP America Chairman James Ross's comment regarding the *American Trader* encapsulates the effective strategy of mortification and organizational protection. "Our lawyers tell us it's not our fault. But we feel like it's our fault and we're going to act like it's our fault" (Jaques, 2015; Sandman, 2002). Unlike Exxon, BP was lauded for its handling of the crisis and media coverage was about as favorable as could be given the nature of the crisis (oil spill and environmental damage).

Exxon's mismanagement of the 1989 *Valdez* disaster became the poster child for the risks associated with the oil industry and the abject failure of a corporation's ability to plan for and respond to a major crisis. The Exxon *Valdez* crisis resulted in relentless media coverage in the first year of the incident and sustained news articles for the next two decades, often referenced when other crises or disasters occurred. In addition, scholars and researchers contributing to the

expanding crisis domain often used Exxon as a case study in organizational failures associated with crisis communication and crisis response. Communication scholars and professionals have used the statements and conduct of Exxon executives during the *Valdez* spill as prime examples of how an organization's leadership can make a crisis worse. This is particularly the case when the CEO of an organization communicates ineffectively. As Harris (1991) notes, the CEO makes or breaks the outcome of public relations efforts and their effectiveness is particularly relevant in crises involving industrial accidents and environmental damage.

While Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl has been extensively criticized for his silence and failure to appear at the scene of the Valdez incident early in the crisis, the BP Gulf oil spill of 2010 provides a textbook example where a CEO's public comments are actually worse than not commenting at all. BP suffered from some of the same planning deficiencies that Exxon encountered in 1989 and parallels exist between the two crises on systemic deficits of corporate executives (Platter, 2011). However, despite some initial inertia, the company attempted to marshal as many resources as it could to contain the spill and begin the cleanup process even though the Macando well continued to gush oil for months following the incident. What made the crisis worse (in addition to the uncertainty of resolution) were repeated statements by BP executives during the crisis that undermined the planned and coordinated crisis communication strategies developed and employed by BP's public relations department.

BP's Discourse During the Gulf Oil Spill

The BP Gulf oil spill was twenty-times larger than the Exxon *Valdez* (Platter, 2011), ensuring that it would receive tremendous media coverage, particularly given the changes in communication technologies since the Exxon *Valdez*. What makes the BP Gulf oil spill so noteworthy was BP CEO Tony Hayward's apparent lack of learning from Exxon's oft-cited

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failures in 1989 or BP's successful approach to their own *American Trader* oil spill crisis in 1990. Hayward's failures were frequent throughout the crisis resulting in his dismissal from the company midway through the crisis. Hayward's misstatements were compounded by an ill-advised comment by Swedish-born BP Chairman Carl-Henric Svanberg on June 16, 2010, when, after meeting with President Obama and apologizing for the spill along with discussions of establishing a fund to compensate victims, Svanberg stated to reporters "we care about the small people" (abcnews.com, 2010; *BBC News*, Condon, 2010; 2010; Scudder, 2010; Wray, 2010). Svanberg's comments, in the context of the many rhetorical mistakes made previously by Hayward, cemented BP's preeminence as not only one of the worst oil spills in history but also one of the worst public relations snafus of a company during a crisis, exceeding Exxon's many failings two decades before.

BP's official strategy, once constructed, consisted of strategies using admission, mortification, corrective action, unity of purpose, and shared responsibility. Its written media releases also included self-protection from additional legal exposure when noting inherent risks and uncertainties in measures undertaken to stop the leaking well or containing the spill—by noting that its efforts were being undertaken at the direction of government authorities. Unlike Exxon, BP's use of unity of purpose and shared responsibility was not an apparent effort at scapegoating or denial, rather a more positive orientation of having a common goal and purpose along with other stakeholders. Scholars who have examined BP's media releases and crisis communication strategy (e.g. Choi, 2012; Kleinnijenhuis, et al., 2015) have suggested that BP's planned strategy was generally successful. Ironically, Tony Hayward is quoted in many of the official media releases utilizing these strategies while at the same time he made his public gaffes that undermined BP's planned crisis communication strategy.

Media/Content Analysis

It is, however, incomplete to only examine planned, prepared strategies evidenced in press releases to determine the effectiveness of a crisis communication strategy. Mistakes in public statements by top executives, such as those made by Exxon during the *Valdez* accident, are problematic and can damage a competent crisis communication strategy. However, the results from this analysis suggests that misstatements and rhetorical gaffes made by a CEO can be near-fatal as it relates to the perceived success of its crisis management efforts and is likely to inflict long-term damage to a company's reputation. The communicative conduct of a CEO is essential to the success of an organization's public relations efforts (Harris, 1991; Lucero, et al., 2009; Pines, 2000). One only has to look at the Trump administration to observe how comments issued by the chief executive overshadow and overwhelm a planned, coordinated strategy carefully crafted by communication professionals. President Trumps public comments and statements through *Twitter* have continued to dominate news reports and negate the White House Press Office's attempts at promoting other narratives (Merica, 2017).

Similarly, the head of an organization is the face of the company and he or she is perceived to be the highest representative the company's view of an issue or crisis. And, like the President, it is impossible to separate comments from the top official from any other communication strategy or its content. Tony Hayward's repeated comments that emphasized minimization, denial, scapegoating and self-pity undermined BP's planned crisis communication. His public comments also contradicted or countervailed statements attributed to him in many of the media releases issued by BP's communication department throughout the crisis. As the head of the organization and its public face, Hayward's comments received far more media coverage than BP's releases and this coverage was decidedly negative. Headlines in news articles

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emphasized the damage BP's executives were inflicting in addition to the spill itself. An April 29, 2010 *New York Times* article titled "Oil spill's blow to BP's image may eclipse costs" (Krauss, 2010) and a June 18, 2010 article in the *Telegraph* "The Gulf of Mexico spill is bad, but BP's PR is even worse" (Warner, 2010) sum up the impact of Hayward and Svanberg's comments on the media and public perception of BP.

What is perplexing it that, given Exxon's communication and management failures during the Exxon *Valdez* crisis became lore in the industry and in crisis management in general, Hayward repeated many of the mistakes made during the 1989 oil spill crisis. Even more surprising is the repeated misstatements Hayward made throughout the crisis. Given the strong criticism after each ill-advised public comment, it is remarkable that Hayward would not be very cognizant of the damage his previous comments had already caused BP and the public perception and choose his future statements very carefully. Hayward's "I want my life back" statement and Exxon's Rawl's silence and lack of presence during the initial stages of the crisis became ingrained in the narrative surrounding both companies during their respective crises and came to be seen as their most egregious communicative misconduct (Holusha, 1989; Scudder, 2010; Wray, 2010). Each CEO reflected either willful ignorance of the harm and damage they had caused or presented an image that their primary concern was for themselves and their companies and not the stakeholders impacted by these large disasters. Both Tony Hayward and Lawrence Rawl should be caveats of the portents companies face when their top executives commit communication blunders during a crisis. Each individual, prior to their companies' crises, were perceived as competent CEOs and generally held in high regard in their industry. Following these incidents, not only were the executives prominent figures who personify failed crisis communication strategies by top corporate officials, the legacy of their companies are forever

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tainted by their rhetorical responses to these crises that have magnified the failures in preparing

for and managing the crises themselves.

Conclusions and Interpretations

Crisis Contagion

One of the most interesting conclusions of this dissertation is the recognition that a

crisis is not limited solely to the actor or actors involved or those directly affected by the crisis.

Instead there is a crisis contagion effect whereby the impact of a crisis often spreads to others not

directly involved in the crisis yet find themselves enveloped by the crisis and linked to the

offending organization through media. Crisis contagion has been presented as a problem with

one company spreading to an industry as a whole and harms the credibility of others not directly

involved in the crisis but operate within that space (Laufer & Wang, 2017). The public often

draws parallels between companies with similar functions or organizations fed by the media

linking organizations. This has been demonstrated in this dissertation by various media sources

during the Exxon *Valdez* and the BP Gulf oil crisis where local vulnerabilities were suggested as

susceptible to such a crisis and in the post-crisis period that resulted in additional scrutiny and

regulation. Crises spread beyond industries. The financial crisis of 2008 exemplified systemic

contagion throughout the world economy affecting nearly every industry, business, government

and individual as well as highlighting the inherent flaws in traditional risk and crisis management

where worst-case-scenarios were not considered in strategic or crisis planning. However, crises

can create crises for others during a crisis in a more limited scope but extend beyond the

immediate impactees.

Crisis contagion often arises out of public frustration with the perceived ineptness of an

organization's response to a crisis or due to scrutiny of causal factors within an industry that

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suggest shortcomings in regulation and oversight. The Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil crises both resulted in calls for increased Congressional action to prevent future crises, as well as a review of existing policy and preparation for such events by federal, state and local governments (Platter, 2012). Each crisis also resulted in several public hearings, both of which highlighted the poor performances by their CEOs. Not only was the entire oil and gas industry forced to examine its existing policies and preparedness status, the U.S. government received considerable criticism for its part in the substandard responses to the crises. Articles examined for the comparative analysis presented in this dissertation often include references to government leaders and government agencies along with an assessment and analysis of their performance in managing the crisis.

The Exxon *Valdez* and the BP Gulf oil spill created leadership crises for President George H.W. Bush and President Barack Obama respectively. Frustrated by the oil companies' response to the spills, the public and media looked to the federal government for some type of resolution to the crisis, as well as for restorative measures with regards to the environment and punitive measures to be taken against those responsible. Each crisis reflected a crisis of confidence in each administration and their ability to respond effectively. This pressure was reflected in each case by public statements made by Presidents Bush and Obama during the crisis and the public and private engagement they subsequently applied to Exxon and BP. President Bush's announcements of federal cleanup efforts during the Exxon *Valdez* crisis spotlighted the tardy nature of the federal response (Watson, 1989). The Obama Administrations provided fodder for critics during the 2010 BP Gulf oil crisis (Pew Research Center, 2010). The spills also resulted in thorough reviews of federal crisis readiness and an examination of policy and regulatory failures that were perceived as producing an environment or conditions where such

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disasters could occur. Like the 1986 space shuttle *Challenger* disaster, changes in organizational structures, response and oversight subsequently resulted from the immense media attention given to the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spill. If a crisis is perceived as not being managed effectively by a company and is viewed as a threat to the public interest (as environmental crises are), the public looks to government for resolution and allocates blame for the failure to institute necessary preventative measures within an industry and for not having the capacity to step in and resolve the crisis. The crisis also spreads to those within an industry to companies not directly involved in the crisis. It may evoke references to their own prior crises, leads to speculation as to vulnerabilities for future crises, and the scrutiny of the crisis at hand forces changes within an industry and its companies to take additional preventative, preparatory and response measures.

The BP Gulf oil spill also exhibits the changing nature of media coverage of crisis events and the impact and influence technology has on crisis communication and public perception. The spill was typically one of the top stories on Twitter and on the blogosphere (Pew Research Center, 2010). The new sources of information available and the ability to react to a crisis by the public through social media is an emerging area of crisis communication research (Spence, Lachlan, & Rainear, 2016). The internet and social will continue to challenge the public relations departments of the organizations involved in the crisis as well as increase the diffusion and awareness and shape the perceptual attitude of the public regarding an organization's management of a crisis (Sung & Hwang, 2014).

Not only does a crisis leave victims in its wake, it also links the organization's name and reputation to future crises. The exponential increase in the ability of the media to disseminate crisis news stories and the public's ability to react immediately ensures that crises will significantly affect media coverage, especially given the fact that social media users can now

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drive the news cycle. While heavy coverage of crises has always been the case (as demonstrated by the news coverage on the Exxon *Valdez* versus the *American Trader* oil spills), the linkage to previous crises (i.e., as a contagion) will function to increase the intensity of reaction by both media organizations and an organization's publics.

This contagion effect shows up not only in the fact that other organizations are caught up in the wake of a company's crisis, but also in the fact that future crises often, then, are interpreted in light of previous crises—a form of echo effect. This echo effect can last for many years, as demonstrated by the Exxon *Valdez* case.

Crisis Echo

The analysis in Chapter IV provides insight into the recognition that a crisis may stay in the public's consciousness, as demonstrated by reference in news articles in subsequent years, long after the crisis has occurred. Media coverage of the Exxon *Valdez*, the *American Trader*, and the BP Gulf oil spill decreased significantly after the first year of their occurrence. However, these media references remained relatively steady in the following years, with the exception of the *American Trader*, where the it largely escaped media attention. For example, although references to the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spill dropped precipitously after the first year of the crisis, they were referenced on average in approximately 1200 to 1500 articles respectively. This means that a crisis, measured in publicity and exposure, has sustainability for several years and continues to affect the reputation of the companies and organizations involved—in effect, creating a crisis echo.

Crises produce an echo that far outlasts the immediacy of the need for a resolution. Crises become ingrained in the public's collective memory and media references remind the public of past events. While news articles that reference crises remain relatively constant in

subsequent years, the results of Chapter IV show that future crises result in significant increases in media references to prior ones, such as the Exxon *Valdez*. For example, references to the Exxon *Valdez* crisis increased 20% in 2002 from the previous year when the *Prestige* oil tanker sunk off the coast of Spain and an increase of over 30% in news story references in 2008 when the Kingston Fossil Plant spilled coal ash into rivers and land in Tennessee. Even the *American Trader*, small in comparison to that caused by the Exxon *Valdez*, was not immune from the crisis echo. References to the *American Trader* incident increased 87% in 2008 when the *Cosco Busan* struck a tower of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, spilling heavy fuel, although the overall number of articles that mentioned the *American Trader* remained relatively small (23) and the coverage was regional. Still, the *American Trader* reinforces the existence of the crisis echo and shows that even a well-managed and positively-perceived organizational response to a crisis can still evoke negative connotations many years after the crisis occurred.

Understanding the coverage given to past crises is important in evaluating how long a crisis lasts in the public consciousness or how one that has been mitigated reemerges during future crises. As a result, a crisis like that of Exxon or BP is embedded in a culture's collective memory. Knight (2012) refers to this phenomenon as "cultural proximity" or the ability for the individual or collectivity to recognize, and eventually embody, representations of the past within the context of the present (p. 350). Individuals can feel culturally close to a certain event or crisis despite being separated by significant periods of time. While the passage of time between crisis events causes memory depletion, research suggest that major events produce recall. This recall is also linked to people's susceptibility to suggested memory narratives and implies that the media may play a large role in framing the perception of a current crisis by references to a previous one (Balgrove, 1996; Otgaar, Alberts, & Cuppens, 2012; Schjoedt, et al., 2013).

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Since media references to prior crises are common, particularly in the oil and gas industry, future research should examine whether these references damage the brand of a company in the present for perceived violations of social expectations in the past.

The magnitude and prominence of the Exxon *Valdez,* Exxon's mismanagement of the crisis from a planning and reactionary perspective along with its poor crisis communication spill elevated the crisis to a notorious and historical status. While it is difficult to determine how much of the immediate and sustained media coverage and public attention is due to the magnitude of the spill or influenced by the combinations of Exxon's mishandling of the crisis, a major crisis within an unfavorable industry causing significant environmental damage, resulted in considerable criticism of Exxon's management. It is likely that the confluence of these and other variables fueled the public interest and extensive media coverage and primed the tone of reporting negatively. "Priming" is a phenomenon that postulates that people absorb information from news stories (Graber, 2004). Often associated with political coverage, priming can lead or sway audience' perceptions positively or negatively and is relevant to Goffman's (1974) Framing Theory and McCombs and Shaw's (1972) agenda-setting. The information absorbed from news stories regarding a significant event such as a crisis are used by audiences to guide their subsequent thinking and perception of that event (Graber, 2004). Negative news, particularly those narratives that involves a corporate villain, are stories that elicit considerable public attention, and public response to an oil crisis is often highly negative and drives coverage by the media (Pew Research Center, 2010). Poor or misguided crisis communication following the onset of a crisis heightens the causal attributions of perceived mismanagement of the crisis, thus making it even more attractive and interesting to media consumers. Prior negative perceptions regarding one crisis can evoke comparisons with future crises, particularly those within the same

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industry and/or suffering from the same deficiencies in response as evidenced by Exxon's inclusion in media stories regarding the 2010 Gulf oil spill crisis.

The concept of a crisis echo supports one of the primary claims of this dissertation – that the resolution or mitigation does of a crisis does not necessarily negate the public awareness of a crisis in subsequent years. Since reputation, brand and image are important assets for corporations, prospective news that reminds or reintroduces the public to past, negative events suggest lingering impacts on a company that may last years and even decades and that one company's past may be tied to another company's present. As revealed in Chapter IV, a review of news databases shows that the Exxon *Valdez* received more coverage during the 2010 BP Gulf oil disaster than it did when it occurred in 1989. This is as pronounced as it is surprising given the vast amount of media attention the crisis received after it happened and speaks to the hyper-mediated environment which now exists. An echo becomes more pronounced when other, similar crises occurs and louder and more acute when a major crisis occurs. This aspect of sustained post-crisis impact should be part of the crisis planning of every company.

Relatedly, companies should take into account the possibility of a crisis echo when considering mergers and acquisitions. While predicting a crisis is by no means a certainty, research into case studies can provide warnings of potential crises, even those with a low-probability of emerging. For example, Dow Chemical should have been prepared for a crisis when it sponsored the 2012 Olympic games in London due to its acquisition of Union Carbide (responsible for thousands of deaths due to a chemical leak in Bhopal, India in 1984). It could have done this by preparing for potential protests and criticisms as occurred in 2012. Dow received considerable media attention along with protests from Indian politicians and environmental groups for acquiring a company that had a major, tragic crisis in its history. As noted in this dissertation, information regarding past crises and companies involved are

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readily available and easily disseminated and companies should be mindful that crisis echoes can sound for years or be invoked under certain conditions.

Crises of similar natures or that occur within industries are linked through media references and typically are not restricted by the passage of time. An evaluation of the media exposure crises receive recognizes the duration and frequency that a crisis remains in media references and in the public's awareness. This dissertation stipulates that future events or issues will or may evoke increases in the number of news stories by reintroducing a prior, resolved crisis into contemporary coverage of a more current crisis. Future research using trend analysis and media exposure may also assist researchers and companies in predicting what types of crises are considered more newsworthy over time, the importance of a company's prior experiences with crises and what industries or sectors are more likely to have sustained or future references in the public realm when other crises arise.

The comparison of media sources on BP's Gulf oil spill and the Exxon *Valdez* present in the *Access World News* database raises many additional issues for consideration by researchers. The much sharper decline for BP after the apex of the crisis in 2010 may be due to the volume of articles written in the first two years of the crisis. Regardless, it has replaced Exxon as the dominant and most cited oil spill. Only time will tell if it continues to demonstrate its prominence, along with anticipated spikes in references to BP's Gulf oil spill crisis when other similar crises arise. The higher rate of decline for BP references following the crisis is likely due to changes in information technology and communication. The technology age has brought about countless means of obtaining and transmitting information which enables the public the ability to seek stories or distractions. The availability of easy access to platforms, social media

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sites and mobile devices that offer users far more options in what they choose to access as opposed to more traditional media present during the Exxon *Valdez* crisis.

The contemporary hyper-mediated environment and the availability of mass amounts of information may suggest that modern crises have staying power in the media and public's attention. Companies, must be mindful that while the Exxon *Valdez* and *American Trader* spills suggest that, although media coverage drops significantly after the first year of the crisis, references to them emerge at higher levels when similar crises arise in the future. As a result, alterations in crisis preparation are warranted. Most now monitor social media and are cognizant of the need for an immediate communicative response should a problem, issue or crisis arise.

While a company may never be able to completely distance itself from a crisis echo—time does eventually due such an organization a favor, in that new crises arise that have the potential to supplant the previous crisis in most individuals' cultural memory. In those cases, the echo then turns into a shadow of itself. The 1989 Exxon *Valdez* case is an example of both the echo and a crisis shadow.

Crisis Shadow

The *American Trader* oil spill in 1990 provides not only a valuable contrast to the physical and communicative responses of the Exxon *Valdez* and BP Gulf oil spills, but also produces an interesting concept that sheds light on why certain crises receive far more attention than others. BP's effective response and exemplary crisis communication strategies (e.g. accepting/assuming responsibility, strong coordination and communication with government officials, continuous public updates) resulted in favorable reviews and a generally positive perception of BP post-crisis. Although and the size of the spill was much smaller than that of Exxon in Prince William Sound, it is quite possible that a failure to communicate effectively

would have resulted in greater media coverage of the event and additional scrutiny of the oil production and transport industry, especially given the Exxon *Valdez* debacle the previous year—and the fact that the spill off the coast of Orange County, California was easily accessible to media outlets.

Results in Chapter IV show that the *American Trader* received far less coverage than the Exxon *Valdez*, even when factoring in the smaller size of the spill. The trend analyses in Chapter IV also demonstrate that references to the *American Trader* spill was minimal in the years following the 1990 accident. Although the *American Trader* did receive increased coverage during future oil spills, the additional news stories were very small in number while the Exxon *Valdez* spill evoked considerable media attention and comparisons during subsequent events. This suggests that not only does a crisis shadow produce reputational protection from media coverage and public during a crisis, this insulation continues in the years that follow.

During the *American Trader* incident, BP benefited from not only an effective response but also good fortune of being the "second" major environmental accident to occur (i.e., the story was familiar and not a "new" one). It would have been much worse if the *American Trader* accident had occurred in isolation (i.e. without a larger spill occurring just a year prior) or if the company had repeated the mistakes of Exxon. The state of California not only has far more local media outlets than Alaska and more stringent environmental laws, it is much less reliant on energy production for the state's economy and employment and, therefore, its economy and population are far less reliant on the industry than Alaska. The *American Trader* could have received a similar level of media attention as the *Valdez* disaster and likely would have received more had the *Valdez* spill not occurred or had BP botched the response and public relations. However, the spill's smaller size and BP's effective response strategy, in stark contrast to

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Exxon's the year before, made it a relatively small footnote in the annals of oil disasters. The Exxon *Valdez* crisis overshadowed the *American Trader*. While an effective response lessens the reputational impact of a crisis on an organization, fortuitously negative events occurring at similar times can overshadow other crises that likely would have received more attention and gained more prominence had other events not occurred.

A crisis shadow also is evidenced in other examples and instances in which a crisis exists or is evolving only to have another more significant event eclipse it (which diminishes or extinguish the media fire that had been unfolding). The publicity and reputational threats that surround a crisis distinguish it from a common problem or issue that needs to be addressed. High media coverage disseminates awareness and the media primes and frames the issues for the public. The symbiotic relationship between the public's interest in an event and the media's attempt to direct attention or respond to public information demands dictates which stories dominate the news cycles. While many crises can receive significant awareness simultaneously or within the same year, a major crisis that captures the public and media attention can remove previously highly-covered events from the headline and diminish the focus on them.

In 2001, several prominent scandals and crises dominated the first half of the year. The media was obsessed with U.S. Rep. Gary Condit and his affair with staffer Chandra Levy who was subsequently found murdered, the Enron accounting scandal had erupted, and the U.S. economy was in recession. These and other stories dominated media coverage until the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the U.S. Pentagon, media coverage focused predominately on the terror attacks and the subsequent U.S. military reaction. Other stories largely disappeared from the headlines or were relegated to the

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back pages of news article when likely would have continued to be highly covered, more prominent stories.

In 2010, the BP Gulf oil spill took much of the spotlight off other stories that likely would have continued to dominate the news. For example, misdeeds by Goldman Sachs officials that contributed to the global financial collapse a little more than a year prior came to light along with additional sexual abuse allegations against priests in the Catholic Church in Europe were developing. Once it happened and dominated media coverage, the BP Gulf oil spill was the public's second most closely followed story of 2010, just behind the devastating earthquake in Haiti which occurred in January of that year and killed thousands (Pew Research Center, 2010). Unlike other stories, the public's ongoing interest in the BP Gulf oil disaster pushed news organizations for continued, greater coverage. The crisis demonstrated how social media and other communication tools allow for users to influence or set the media agenda, a development of which crisis managers and public relations professionals must be mindful.

As alluded to earlier, a crisis shadow also can be the replacement of a notable and often referenced crisis by a more prominent crisis occurring later. This is, and will be, the case with BP surpassing Exxon as the preeminent environmental disaster, especially within the oil and gas sector. Exxon will likely step back into BP's shadow now that BP has emerged as an environmental villain characterized by a lack of preparation for the crisis and the failed communication by its CEO and chairman. While it is likely that Exxon will continue to be referenced during future oil spills, it is suggested here that these references will be diminished or more tempered and the primary comparison for future oil spills and other industrial and environmental disasters will be made to BP's 2010 Gulf oil spill and their ineffective response to the crisis.

A crisis shadow can not only overtake the immediate media attention given to one crisis over another, it can change the media and public focus from the context of the crisis to how a company responds. This is evidenced by BP's management of the *American Trader* crisis versus its predecessor, the Exxon *Valdez*. Repeated media stories included positive analyses of how BP and government agencies responded to the crisis and the framing of the articles was not entirely on the environmental damage, thus making the much sparser coverage of the *American Trader* a composite of information and organizational competence. Since the media play an important role in shaping public opinion and public perception (Lerbinger, 2011), positive or negative coverage of an organization's management of a crisis will impact the reputation of a company and may for years.

As a crisis shadow diminutively impacts the media coverage at the time of the event, this reduction in coverage that would normally accompany a crisis in the absence of the other crisis that cast the shadow also diminishes future media references to that event. This shadow can overtake the attention that would normally be given to one crisis had another not occurred. As concerning for companies involved in a crisis, a crisis can live on in the public's consciousness for years after it has largely been mitigated and resolved through the media and the research that arises from the crisis. Since reputations are highly coveted by companies and other organizations and crises are threats to reputations, repeated references in the media to prior crises in subsequent years suggests that the impacts of a crisis last longer than most companies and public relations professionals recognize.

Chapter IV reveals the relationships between the Exxon *Valdez*, *American Trader* and BP Gulf oil spill and how certain crises within an industry receive media attention and are often referred to during subsequent crises, both within an industry and those with similar impacts or

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perceived management effectiveness. The Exxon *Valdez* case study shows how a certain crisis can be both a crisis shadow and become a crisis echo until another replaces it in prominence. The crisis, and Exxon's ineffective response, overshadowed the *American Trader* spill of 1990 and reduced the attention and media coverage given to the *American Trader* that may have been more extensive had the Exxon *Valdez* disaster not occurred the year prior. As the results in Chapter IV show, sustained references to the *Valdez* and Exxon's failures in managing the crisis continued to appear in news stories and research articles for twenty years with increases in references to the Exxon *Valdez* crisis present in the years where other disasters occurred. This demonstrates that crises and the damage to a company's reputation last much longer than many may recognize.

The Exxon *Valdez* was the most pronounced and referenced oil spill within the industry and, arguably, perceived as one of the greatest man-induced environmentally damaging crises in history. In 2010, Exxon was replaced as the prominent crisis of its kind by BP's Gulf oil spill crisis. The BP disaster amplified the echo effect of the Exxon *Valdez* by evoking even more media references to the Exxon disaster than in the year it occurred. BP not only overshadowed other crises occurring during the same time period, it has, and will, be the most pronounced exemplar of its kind. While future spills and environmental catastrophes may still invoke references to the Exxon *Valdez*, the BP Gulf oil spill and BP's response will exceed all mentions of Exxon and be the primary example when comparisons are made with past crises. As Fearn-Banks stated during the BP spill: "The people at Exxon must be sharing champagne right now. They're not the worst company in the world right now. It's BP" (Mulken, 2010).

While the findings of crisis contagion, crisis shadow and crisis echo are the most provocative of this dissertation, it has also broken new ground with regards to the theoretical

development as it relates to apologia strategies—by discovering and explicating a number of additional strategies beyond those of Benoit and Hearit. These developments expand apologia strategies to unplanned, unscripted or off-the-cuff remarks made by top executives during a crisis and how these strategies impact the organization's crisis communication strategy. The additional apologia strategies also expand the applicability of apologia to assorted contexts and can afford researchers the ability to dissect crisis communication strategies that have multiple objectives during various stages of a crisis. This dissertation also suggests that comments by key executives influence the public perception of an organization's management of a crisis and affect the narrative surrounding the crisis by the media.

Additional Message Strategies

Crisis communication strategies of Hearit (1994, 1995, 2006) and Benoit (1997; 2004) were applied to the planned communication responses of Exxon during the 1989 Exxon *Valdez* crisis and BP during the 2010 Gulf oil crisis and the statements of the companies' top executives during the crises. The definitions were modified on some of the strategies for greater applicability and to capture nuances present in many organizational crisis response strategies demonstrated in many case studies. During the analysis of the content, these modifications became necessary, particularly when examining Exxon's responses during the *Valdez* crisis. For example, differentiation was expanded to include "it may also be used to focus on certain features of the crisis or response, change or deflect attention or to promote the company's perception of their management of the crisis." The modification allows for the incorporation of more defensive posturing or attempts by to alter perception through distinction between certain aspects of a crisis or responsibility. It encapsulates a thematic strategy of Exxon throughout the crisis summarized in the context of "we are kind of responsible but . . ."

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This thesis also added an additional six strategies of apologia and image repair: *unity of purpose, compensation, admission*, *shared responsibility, self-pity* and *silence.* The additional strategies allow for the capture and description of additional strategies present in the Exxon *Valdez* and BP case studies. CEO Lawrence Rawl's and other executives' silence during the early stage of the *Valdez* crisis was the most acknowledged communicative behavior and received considerable criticism. Silence has applicability to other crisis, such as those involved a delayed reaction or a "no comment." The absence of communication during a crisis can be as damaging and controversial as misstatements or poor choices of strategies. Unity of purpose and shared responsibility were strategies used by both Exxon and BP during their crisis, albeit with what appears to be different objectives. Exxon's use of unity of purpose was to suggest others should also pay for the cost off the cleanup of the spill, such as U.S. taxpayers, and their use of shared responsibility was similar to their scapegoating techniques where they attempted to allocate blame to others. BP's use of unity of purpose and shared responsibility was an attempt to place the organization on the side of those who wanted to resolve the crisis. In essence, it became a "we're-in-this-together" for a common goal in an attempt to show that BP was working with others (many of whom were critical of BP) rather than continue to appear to be the villain.

Compensation and admission as strategies were also present in both case studies as well as the *American Trader*. However, like unity of purpose and shared responsibility, Exxon and BP used these strategies differently. Although Exxon admitted some culpability for the crisis, most media stories and researchers stipulated that Exxon never really took responsibility for the spill or the cleanup, further damaging their credibility. And while Exxon suggested in its advertisements that it would compensate for the damage caused, Exxon continued to qualify its financial responsibilities throughout the crisis. Exxon seemed resolved to, first settle as many

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claims with residents as early and as favorably as possible, then let the courts (under the protections of liability limits in the law) determine its financial obligations. The public perception regarding compensation and costs for Exxon was that the company was trying to minimize the impact on itself rather than making things right by those affected.

Early in the BP crisis, Tony Hayward made comments similar to Rawl's saying Exxon would pay "legitimate claims." Hayward suggested that there would be false claims that needed review. However, news releases later stated that they would not dispute claims even if they may not be warranted. BP also quickly realized the damage the spill was causing to its image and the liability they faced and appeared to make a conscious decision (and I argue wise) to pay all costs, even those they may not be legally responsible for, and dispute very little. Although President Obama deserves some credit for the pressure he applied with regards to the need for compensation and resolution, early gaffes by Hayward also played a role. His reported "what the hell did we do to deserve this?" comment at the onset of the crisis demonstrated self-pity and appeared more concerned with the impact the spill was having on BP rather than those killed in the initial explosion or the thousands affected. As a result of such a callous statement, the need for "proportional humiliation" in the form of increased compensation, was a likely result. Unlike Exxon, however, BP seemed to realize that the damage to its reputation was significant and that the financial impact on the company was already great and could potentially increase if the company continued to promote self-pity or defensive postures, as Exxon had in 1989,

The development of these additional strategies provides an important contribution to the research around crisis management and apologia. This final section, then, offers some suggestions with regards to additional future directions of academic research in crisis management in general and with regards to Exxon and BP specifically.

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Future Research

One potential direction of future research should examine the trends of the BP Gulf oil crisis in subsequent years to determine whether patterns in media exposure are similar or correlate with patterns observed in searches of annualized media coverage on the Exxon *Valdez* oil spill and predicted in this dissertation. If the trend of the Exxon *Valdez* is an indication, the volume of media coverage given to the BP Gulf oil spill crisis suggests that the BP crisis will be oft-cited and remain the most high-profile oil spill crisis until replaced by a worse disaster of a similar nature. Future environmental disasters, particularly oil spills, are also predicted to increase references to the BP Gulf oil spill in media stories, following the twenty-year trend observed for the Exxon *Valdez*. The crisis shadow concept predicts that references to the Exxon *Valdez* will diminish and it will be supplanted by references to the BP Gulf oil spill crisis during future large oil spills or industrial accidents cause significant environmental damage.

References of past crises to contemporary crises may recall blame and accountability for those responsible for prior crises as they observe the present one unfolds through various media and social channels. However, the selectivity of what crisis the media will devote significant coverage on is an area in need of future studies. As Sharp (2010) observed, oil spills in or near the U.S. receive far more coverage than those occurring in other parts of the world. The 'gatekeeping' effect, or how the media selects topics of interest has been examined as well as the impact the internet has had on traditional media sources (i.e. Messner & DiStaso, 2008; Messner & Terilli, 2007; Williams & Delli Carpini, 2004). Perhaps driven by public demand in the changing technological era, it should be noted that Exxon and BP received far more coverage than similar spills occurring in other parts of the world. Exxon's past crisis was referenced during the BP crisis significantly higher than any other spill, even those with more similar

characteristics to the Gulf oil spill. For example, oil spills from similar blowouts in the Gulf of Mexico (the Ixtoc I and Deepwater Horizon) are two strikingly similar events 31 years apart where the first thing to note is how all but forgotten the first episode had become when the second one happened (Jernelöv, 2010, p. 363).

Future research should also examine how and why certain articles are accessed and forwarded through social media and other means of communication and evaluate users' comments regarding a crisis that often accompany the article. This will provide valuable insight into determining which crises receive the most public interest (and drive the media coverage) as well as providing information regarding public perception of the event. Furthermore, by examining the role of social media and how social media and the internet, researchers and practitioners can gain continue to examine how information is diffused through society, the impact of technology on the diffusion of information regarding crises or other notable events and may produce additional methods for researching communication and other areas related to crisis management. While expanding, communication research on crises and the influence of social media faces limitations and obstacles (Spence, Lacklan, & Rainear, 2016). However, the importance of the influence of technological advances in communication and their impact on crises shouldn't be underestimated.

This thesis does not examine the populations associated with media coverage or analyze perception based on demographic information. For example, younger generations are more likely to get their news and information through the internet or social media while technological laggards are still largely reliant on traditional news sources, such as television broadcasts. Additional research may provide insight into the demographics of those exposed to crisis news and determine whether the mediums of information attainment influence public perception of a

company's management of a crisis. Future research can also assist companies in targeting their crisis communication strategies to particular subsets of populations that may be more positively influenced by certain messages during a crisis in order to elicit a more favorable result and perception of their crisis management.

Limitations

This dissertation expands the use of apologia strategy by including public comments made by top executives during a crisis. The addition of categories or classifications to strategies, however, may not be exhaustive. Other case studies may suggest additional strategies are present, definitional constructs need to be further modified, or that general strategies are present and certain strategies may be more aptly subsets of a broader category. The analytical constructs of the additional strategies produced here are based largely on the works of Hearit and Benoit. And while content analyses in qualitative work is often derived from existing theories (Krippendorff, 2004), the work of other communication scholars may suggest that alterations that consider additional theories are warranted. Furthermore, while *prima facia* evidence suggests that the comments by top executives negatively impact the public perception of an organization's response to a crisis, a more detailed examination is warranted. For example, focus groups can be utilized that examine the influence of a company's planned crisis communication strategy on perception and then exposed to an executive's public statements to determine the level and intensity those comments impacted or altered the effectiveness of the organization's strategy. This may be particularly relevant to our understanding of the crisis echo and its effect on future generations and how it may influence a company's reputation. If contemporary crises often evoke references to past crises, as evidenced by the Exxon *Valdez* case during the 2010 BP Gulf

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oil spill, it would be useful to examine the impact on perception of a company due to its past on people introduced to the prior violations of social legitimacy for the first time.

Like the crisis echo, additional research is also needed to evaluate the other theories and concepts presented in this dissertation. While the crisis shadow suggests that one crisis dominates another, thus removing it from the public spotlight, the reasons why one crisis overshadows another may not be as clear or precise as presented here. Rather than effective management and the size of a crisis, such as the *American Trader* versus Exxon *Valdez* crises, the public and media may simply suffer from crisis fatigue and their interest in absorbing additional bad news stories has lessened their interests in a subsequent crisis and turned their attention to other types of news stories. This may also be the case in contemporary crises where the public has far more access to various news and entertainment sources. Thus, the amount of attention dedicated to a modern crisis by individuals may be shortened due to societal changes resulting from technology and not necessarily an interest or lack of interest in a certain crisis.

Last, although the number of news stories reflects the dissemination of information regarding a crisis, it does not provide quantitative data regarding the exact number of people who read the article and became aware of a crisis or expressed an interest in it. Future research can track the number of people who accessed stories regarding a crisis and forwarded these stories on to others. Additionally, the media covering these stories can be surveyed (similar to those utilized in political science research) to assess the perception of journalists covering the events and examine whether these perceptions influence the framing of the coverage of the event or result in media bias. The methodologies researchers are able to utilize are limited by traditional social science methods of data collection, crisis research can and should utilize means outside of the conventions of social scientific inference (Spence, Lachlan, & Rainear, 2016). This also

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suggests that evaluation research, with its multi-disciplinary nature and use and application of a variety of methods and approaches is ideally suited for crisis research and provides a promising means of expanding our understanding of crisis events and the need to understand crises, plan for crises, manage crises effectively and whenever possible, prevent crises from occurring.

Conclusion

This dissertation has attempted to answer the general question of how media attention affects crisis resolution and retention by using a rhetorical and content analysis methodology. By evaluating and comparing similar crises at different points in time, this dissertation has demonstrated the contagion effects the crises have on others in addition to the impacts the crisis has on the organization involved and its stakeholders. It has demonstrated long-term effects that result in both an echo and a shadow effect. As reputation is an important strategic asset for companies and organizations, this dissertation shows that the impact a crisis has on an organization can extend well beyond the time of occurrence as evidenced by sustained media references long after its supposed resolution.

This dissertation also reviewed the content and impact of public comments made by key executives during a crisis and comparted these comments with the crisis communication strategies implemented by the companies during their crises. As such, this dissertation suggests that an organization's crisis communication performance during a crisis cannot be viewed simply through an organization's planned and coordinated strategy. Rather, a company's communication effectiveness must be considered in totality and comments and statements attributed to top executives will impact the media narrative of the event and the public's perception of the organization and its ability to manage a crisis. In so doing, it has reviewed and discovered additional messaging strategies used by apologists as well as teased out the effects of

media coverage and public perception on the overall communication strategies of the companies examined. Furthermore, this dissertation reveals that crisis communication strategies that use apologia and image repair may be more nuanced and complex than previously understood. As the crisis management and crisis communication domain expand significantly, this dissertation suggests that, like crises, our understanding of crisis phenomena is not static and, as such, we should continue to review, research, and evaluate the many facets of crisis as our continued contribution to others.

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APPENDIX

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