Ritualistic sacrifice in crisis communication: A case for eliminating scapegoating from the crisis/apologia lexicon

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ABSTRACT

The crisis strategy of scapegoating has been part of the crisis and image restoration lexicon for more than four decades. And yet, the practice of scapegoating is a well-known unethical practice that simply deflects deserved blame from one party to a sacrificial other. This essay critiques the "Primary Crisis Response" strategy of scapegoating, conducting an historical and ethical critique of the crisis strategy, and concludes that scapegoating should be removed from the public relations crisis and image restoration lexicon.

Over the last several decades, the state of various public relations' reputational measures including corporate social responsibility, organizational ethics counsel, etc. have been examined by more than a thousand scholars—almost a thousand in *Public Relations Review* alone—in order to understand the impact that reputation and public perception have on organizational success (cf. Kim & Krishna, 2017; Neill & Weaver, 2017; Shim & Yang, 2016; Sisson, 2017). Surveys of professional reputation continue to conclude that the reputation of public relations is among the lowest of the professional communicators (lower even than politicians and videogame designers) and the least likely profession for a parent to encourage a child to pursue (https://blogs.voanews.com/all-about-america/2016/04/01/what-most-prestigious-us-jobs-have-in-common-and-its-not-money).

Scholars have posited a number of possible explanations for public relations' poor reputation. Possibilities include millennials who have been unprepared for their roles as ethical counselors (Neill & Weaver, 2017), reputational problems caused by poor social media communication (Ott & Theunissen, 2015), a focus on client needs over the good of stakeholders and publics (Yang, Taylor, & Saffer, 2016), our negative reputation being caused by poorly trained professionals and negative portrayals in the media (Bowen, 2009), etc. However, this article posits something that many reputational studies have found but have not stated as bluntly: one of the primary reasons for our less than positive reputation is because *we are simply not acting as ethical communicators*.

Public relations has been organization-centric for decades, particularly when it comes to crisis communication (cf. Heath, 2010; Kent, 2010). For example, in terms of crisis communication, we still advocate for: attacking the accuser, denial, scapegoating, making excuses, justifications, and compensation to victims, as "primary crisis response strategies" (Coombs, 2007). Moreover, scholars of dialogue (Lane, 2014) and engagement (Mahin, 2017) have found that organizations regularly orchestrate faux-engagement and manipulative dialogue as a means of achieving organizational goals at the expense of stakeholder interests and desires.

The focus of this essay is on one such well-established and patently unethical crisis communication strategy mentioned above: scapegoating. Scapegoating is an apologia strategy that has been repeatedly examined for more than four decades. We present evidence that scapegoating represents an obviously unethical practice that violates established codes of conduct, including the PRSA

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code of ethics, everyday codes of ethics like the Golden Rule, and philosophically based codes of ethics such as Kant's Categorical Imperative. Scapegoating involves intentionally taking advantage of others, "sacrificing" the careers and livelihoods of others for *the good of an individual, or organization,* and cannot be justified as acceptable because of past practices (norms) or utility.

To make the case, the essay will be divided into four sections. The first section will briefly review the literature on apologia and image restoration, and in particular, the approach taken to apologia in Coombs (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). The second section conducts a review of the strategy of scapegoating going back to Kenneth Burke's (1973/1941) original treatment of scapegoating in "Sin and Redemption." The third section of the essay examines historic and recent examples of scapegoating including presidents Trump and Nixon's use of scapegoating, as well as Volkswagen, and other corporate and political leaders. The fourth section of the essay conducts a critique of scapegoating in light of historical theory and practice, concluding that scapegoating represents an ethically amoral response to crisis and image restoration.

As a phenomenon of study, image restoration (and crisis) typically focuses on the needs of the organization and is defined from an organizational standpoint. As Benoit (1995) suggests, "human beings engage in recurrent patterns of communicative behavior designed to reduce, redress, or avoid damage to their reputation (or face or image) from perceived wrong-doing" (p. vii). The same is true of crisis communication, of which apologia is a form. As Coombs (2010) suggested, a crisis is "the perception of an unpredicted event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p. 19; cf. also, Coombs, 1999). The literature on apologia and image restoration highlights the key issues.

1. Apologia and image restoration

Little critique of the concepts of crisis and apologia has been undertaken over the last three decades. Although scholars have conducted many case studies and experimental studies trying to sort out what strategies are used most and have the most value in various situations, few have noticed that some of the strategies are unethical on their face. The examination of apologia and image restoration is this section begins that discussion.

Although some scholars have pointed out that crisis communication practices should serve more than organizational interests (Heath, 2010; Kent, 2010), in practice, both image restoration and crisis are undertaken for the benefit of leaders, or organizations, rather than to serve the needs or interests of stakeholders and publics (cf. Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Indeed, as Benoit (1995) noted, "discourse that apologizes, makes excuses, or otherwise attempts to restore a favorable image is pervasive" (p. viii). In times of crisis, organizations engage in an assortment of "best communication practices," as well as proactive and reactive strategies, such as apologia and image restoration, in order to reduce the impact of crises and restore public trust and organizational equilibrium.

Awareness of the rhetorical role played by apologies goes back to ancient Greece (cf. Huxman, 2004) and Aristotle's treatment of the topic. The modern study of apologia in communication and public relations can probably be traced back to Rosenfield (1968) examination of the Nixon–Truman speeches, and Ware and Linkugel's (1973) seminal essay, "They Spoke in Defense of Themselves." Additionally, Kenneth Burke's (1973/1941, 1970/1961) earlier essays on "apologia," examining scapegoating via "sin" and "redemption," go back almost 80 years.

Apologia is generally defined as a "speech in self-defense" (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 273) wherein individuals and organizations respond to reputational threats. Ware and Linkugel identified four different factors (denial, bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence) and four different postures (absolution, vindication, explanation, and justification) of self-defense. Early examinations of apologia centered around individual responses prompted by threats against the character of the person. Indeed, previous research has demonstrated the value of exploring apologia as a rhetorical genre, specifically within the political arena (Gold, 1978; Kramer & Olson, 2002; Stein, 2008; Theye, 2008).

Also worth noting, is that scapegoating has been widely applied to organizational responses as well. Hearit (1995) argued that organizational apologia warrants distinct research given its inherent differences from individual apologia. In a similar vein, Rowland and Jerome (2004) explored additional subgenres of apologia specifically tailored to organizational responses. The distinction between individual and organizational apologia is significant given that the scope of this essay extends into both realms, and will be discussed at greater length in the following sections.

2. Situational crisis communication theory

With almost 1,300 citations (cf., Scholar.Google.com), Coombs (2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is perhaps the most cited essay on using apologia as part of image restoration and crisis. Over the last decade, Coombs (2010) SCCT has become one of the leading models for crisis research. According to Coombs, crises can be handled by understanding as assortment of issues that include attribution theory, reputational threat, crisis type, and crisis response strategies.

SSCT is rooted in Attribution Theory (1986, Heider, 1944; Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967; Weiner, 1985), which posits that "people search for causes of events (make attributions), especially those that are negative and unexpected" (Coombs, 2007, p. 165). In the context of a crisis, then, SCCT suggests that accusations are likely to arise when conditions of perceived wrongdoing are particularly damning in the eyes of relevant publics. The implications from attribution theory are important to consider in the context of crisis communication research. Jeong (2009), for example, found that "attributions can guide punitive opinions and behaviors toward corporate actors" (p. 308). Thus, the perceived causes associated with an event can inform the severity of accusations made against an individual or an organization. The issue of severity is consistent with Ryan's (1982) argument that apologia and kategoria (accusations) should be considered together as a speech set. Consequently, one might infer that if attributions inform the accusation, the accusation informs the response.