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# Towards a postmodern understanding of crisis communication

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**Abstract**

From a postmodernist perspective, it is possible to see crisis as a disruption in the dominant narrative that members of an organization's power elite wish to perpetuate. The crisis itself often evolves into a multiplicity of competing narratives. Much standard advice given by crisis communication experts—such as to tell the truth, choose a single spokesperson, and establish a crisis command center to regain control of the crisis—sounds suspiciously like the self-protecting actions favored by the power elite within the organization. A postmodernist approach might instead favor mitigation of suffering, attention to dissent, and a polyvocal organizational response.


*Keywords:* Postmodernism; Crisis communication; Storytelling; Narrative

In a 1998 review essay, Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) suggest the intriguing and potentially fruitful notion that "the metaphor of postmodernity, with its emphasis on situated meanings, multiple audiences, counterrationality, and competing narratives, may prove useful for our understanding of organizational crisis" (p. 269). Holtzhausen (2000) goes further: "There is not a single area of public relations research and practice that cannot be analyzed from a postmodern perspective" (p. 111) although the "project will need the concerted effort of a group of scholars" (p. 111). A modest but growing body of literature (Duffy, 2000; Freed, 1993; Holtzhausen, 2000, 2002a, 2002b; Mickey, 1997; Seeger, 2002; Toth, 2002) testifies to public relations scholars' response.

Researchers investigating the narrower subset of crisis communication have, however, devoted fewer resources and less attention to examining their specific field from explicitly postmodernist perspectives. While Livesey (2001) has drawn on the postmodernist theory of Jean-François Lyotard to examine a global controversy over a multinational oil company's business practices in the United Kingdom and Nigeria, she explicitly disavows crisis communication as a primary interest. Although he never uses the word "postmodernism," Berger (1999) examines three aspects of ideological world view—distortion, legitimation, and terrain of struggle—in a case study of the public relations practices of the Upjohn company's response to controversy over the safety of the sleeping pill Halcion. More recently, Venette, Sellnow, and Lang (2003) propose that we examine an organization's response to crisis as a series of competing narratives told by the media and by the organization itself. While the authors are to be commended for drawing on postmodernist theory to elucidate crisis communication, their charted model of the process inaccurately (and perhaps inadvertently) implies that the process is orderly and linear, involving neat turn-taking between the organization

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and the media, as well as tidy, step-by-step logical causality. It also suggests a bilateral rather than multilateral engagement. But an organization's stakeholders are not unified, and it is a rare crisis that unfolds in such orderly fashion.

In this article, I sketch a preliminary outline of what postmodernism might have to contribute to crisis communication research and practice. Ideally, we should be able to move from analysis of past public relations practices to recommendations of what future best practices should be. Ultimately, this article suggests that postmodernism asks us to attend to the marginalized voices that the power elite within an organization suppress and listen to the alternative truths that emerge only through the informal communication (including gossip) within an organization. We must also learn to recognize the often false imputation of innocence to managers in most crisis communication advice and regard with a certain degree of skepticism such standard doctrines as the value of a crisis communication plan, the need to regain control of the situation as quickly as possible, the necessity of appointing a single (or at least primary) spokesperson, and the recommended establishment of a crisis command center. A postmodernist approach in formulating recommended crisis communication strategies might instead encourage mitigation of suffering, facilitate polyvocal responses to crisis, and foster attention to internal dissent as a stimulus to organizational change and self-awareness.

## 1. A definition of postmodernism

Defining postmodernism is complicated, for there are multiple postmodernisms:

> For example, Derrida's postmodernism is a search for differences and indeterminacy using his deconstructive method; Lyotard's is a search for local narratives, instabilities, and dissensus; Baudrillard's is a search for simulations and hyperreality; Nietzsche's is a will to know, because people cannot tolerate not knowing; and Foucault's uses genealogy to oppose essential truths as expressions of discursive power and domination. (Boje, Fitzgibbons, & Steingard, 1996, p. 91)

For the purposes of this paper, I am most interested in Lyotard's (1984) project of discrediting and abandoning all totalizing, universalizing, and essentializing grand narratives in favor of multiple, simultaneous, competing local narratives. But this analysis also draws directly and indirectly on other postmodernist thought, for (as one scholar points out) a "multifaceted theoretical approach is in line with the postmodern emphasis on multiplicity and diversity" (Holtzhausen, 2000, p. 98).

In that spirit, let me draw for a moment on Derrida and the deconstructionists, who teach us that for postmodernists, everything is text. It can be useful to think of the organization as a text—or, to shift to a slightly different but parallel metaphor, to think of the organization as a storytelling system (Boje, 1991, 1995): "At the organizational level, stories are the primary ingredient of culture; organizations are often held together by stories and by their sister agent, the gossip network" (Bergquist, 1993, p. 146). Every organization has its "official story": "An organizational fiction is created that everyone is supposed to accept as true, yet which no one believes to be true" (Bergquist, 1993, p. 126).

## 2. Crisis as a disruption in the dominant narrative

A crisis often disrupts that official story, the dominant narrative about itself that an organization attempts to maintain. It may open that official narrative up to public contest. Competing narratives that the organization had temporarily (semi-successfully) suppressed in favor of its preferred dominant narrative now erupt to counter the dominant narrative, as do alternate narratives of which the organization often is wholly unaware. These various counter-narratives may address the issue called into question by the crisis, but they may also address other and larger issues, including some only tangentially related to the precipitating crisis. Such counter-narratives emerge not merely from the news media, but also from various stakeholders (although they may perhaps become widely known to the general public *through* the news media).

## 3. The problem with traditional approaches to crisis communication

Crisis communication scholars all too often fall back on the bromides of received "wisdom": "be candid" and "tell the truth." Managers are adjured to uncover the truth and state it, as if good crisis communication involved simply determining what is going on out there in the real world and putting it into completely transparent, value-free language.