British Petroleum’s Crisis Communication: Case Study of the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill

Research Questions

**RQ 1:** How did British Petroleum’s image restoration strategy change throughout the crisis?

**RQ 2:** How did BP use technical jargon within their press releases from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap?

**RQ 3:** How did the local media respond to the use of technical jargon from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap?

**RQ 4:** How did local media frame the crisis from the date of the explosion to the date of the cap?

Research Methods

- Case Study Method
- A census of 79 BP press releases with 575 paragraphs and 338 newspaper articles with 5,420 paragraphs from Houston Chronicle and Tampa Bay Times from April 20, 2010 to July 15, 2010 were collected and analyzed.
- 16 variables from press releases were coded.
- Variables coded included: valence of the title, paragraph valence, presence of technical jargon, and presence of Benoit’s image restoration strategy.
- 16 variables from newspaper articles were coded.
- Variables coded included: date published, article type (editorial or news), wire, valence of the article title, paragraph valence, technical jargon, and rhetorical option.

Findings

- Implication for journalism: local newspaper framing can affect local opinions and even local legislation making them a powerful source.
- Implication for PR practice: highlighted an untapped market and proved news releases did not impact local newspaper coverage.
- Implication for theory: Benoit’s Image Restoration Strategies: *defend the act* should be inserted because defending an action differs so greatly when compared to stressing the positive aspects of a situation.
- This is the first analysis in the field of public relations and crisis communication to focus on local not elite newspapers coverage and the first to analyze technical jargon utilized by the corporation in press releases during the major event.

RQ 1: Analysis discovered the top 3 most heavily utilized image restoration strategies to be: corrective action (27.3%), bolstering (16.7%), and compensation (10.3%).

RQ 2: Most articles did not contain technical jargon, but the use of technical jargon peaked twice: first the day BP began spraying chemical dispersants directly on the well, and again the day after BP began their final attempt to seal the well.

RQ 3: The technical jargon in newspapers hit an apex with 16 on June 2nd with news stories featuring information about environmental groups taking action to sue BP and projections showing the spill reaching Pensacola, FL’s beaches soon after that date.

RQ 4: There was no significant difference found between wire news articles and the locally written articles, but a significant difference was uncovered when comparing the title and paragraph valence between the two local media outlets.

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