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## Implications of Truthers on Post Crisis Communication and Resolution

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IMPLICATIONS OF TRUTHERS ON POST CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND  
RESOLUTION

by

LAUREN SEMENAS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Advertising and Public Relations  
in the College of Sciences  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

The intent of this thesis is to better comprehend the strategies used in crisis denial videos from the perspective of kategoria. Benoit and Dorries taxonomy of kategoria was applied to crisis denial claims using the Sandy Hook elementary school shooting as a case study. The claims of prominent truther and YouTuber, Alex Jones, were coded and analyzed based on this taxonomy. The categories of the taxonomy include: accused committed the act before, accused planned the act, accused knew likely consequences of the act, accused benefitted from the act, and other. Two coders trained in identifying these criteria coded three transcribed YouTube videos focused on Sandy Hook with a combined total of over 1.5 million views. Accused planned the act and accused committed the act before were the most used taxonomy, with a 4 to 1 and 2 to 1 margin respectively, showing a consistent preference on how Jones likes to construct his claims. These tactics put the victims of Sandy Hook in an uncomfortable position because they are forced to deny the denial, a process that quickly becomes cyclical. The responses either transcend to an issue of free speech versus defamation or attack the accuser through litigation and public organizations dropping him. Claims that the accused has done it before denies closure to multiple crises while claims that it was planned seem endless and also contribute to denying closure. This denial puts victims in a chronic stage where they are forced to constantly and endlessly re-evaluate the crisis without resolution, disrupting current stage theory in crisis recovery. Truthers have changed how we define hoax. Previously, a hoax was the crisis, but now claims are made post-crisis depicting the crisis as hoax. Further research should focus on the formulation of a response to crisis denial that can break the cyclical pattern.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iv
LIST OF TABLES .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CASE SUMMARY.....	3
PREVIOUS LITERATURE .....	5
Kategoria Discourse .....	5
Crisis Evolution Stages .....	6
Hoaxes and Crisis.....	8
METHOD .....	9
Data Set .....	9
Procedure.....	10
DISCUSSION.....	13
Accused Committed the Act Before.....	13
Accused Planned the Act.....	17
Accused Knew Likely Consequences of the Act .....	23
Accused Benefitted from the Act .....	24
Other.....	25
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS.....	27
LIMITATIONS.....	30
CONCLUSION.....	31
REFERENCES .....	32

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Increasing the Target's Perceived Responsibility for the Act. ....	13
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## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Alex Jones YouTube Videos on Sandy Hook. ....	10
Table 2. Referenced Evidence of Planned Crises. ....	15

## INTRODUCTION

Current crisis communication theory revolves around identifying and progressing through predictable stages during a crisis that ultimately ends with resolution or renewal. Resolution allows communities to move past a crisis and look to the future, while renewal ushers in new policies or procedures to better deal with risks in the future (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2018). In both cases, communities learn from the crisis and look to the future. The final stage of recovery is needed to rebuild and move forward post-crisis. Increasing prevalence of truthers and hoaxers are challenging this last stage and ultimately preventing communities from moving on post-crisis. In a way, these truthers act similar to terrorist hoaxes. Terrorist hoaxes involve people who exploit uncertainty in order to erode responders' ability to communicate knowledgeably on the facts and issues surrounding a specific risk (Heath, McKinney, & Palenchar, 2005; Sellnow, Littlefield, Vidoloff, & Webb, 2009). The parallel here, is the exploitation of uncertainty through a flood of false information in order to prevent the communication of facts and the progression of the stages through crisis to resolution or renewal.

Truthers are conspiracy theorists who believe the truth about a crisis is being concealed from the public. They tend to believe the crisis was a cover up with misleading information or even a complete fabrication. Conspiracy theorists are not new to society, but truthers moved to another level by using new media to vocally and insistently deny that many well-documented crises happened at all. Some go as far as threatening the surviving victims of a crisis. Looking at how truthers deny that crises occurred is imperative for evaluating what sort of impact they have on post crisis recovery. If truthers are disrupting and inhibiting the progression from crisis to resolution and renewal, how can or should crisis responders communicate in response to these

claims? Acknowledging loss as a result of a crisis is the first part of resolution and renewal. Crisis denial creates difficulty in fully moving past the crisis. This difficulty is evident in Newtown, Connecticut, where victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting are still struggling to heal and move forward due to continued disruption from truthers denying the crisis occurred. The Sandy Hook shooting is one of many examples of truthers interrupting resolution and renewal, but for the sake of this analysis, it will be used as the frame for which this new dynamic is explored.



## CASE SUMMARY

On December 14, 2012 in Newtown, Connecticut, 20 students and six adults were shot and killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School. The shooter, Adam Lanza, first killed his mother, then those at the elementary school and lastly himself after first responders arrived on scene at the school. Shortly after the shooting, people started to criticize the events that took place. Those dubbed as truthers have varying degrees of criticism ranging from claims that some facts about what happened have been withheld from the public to insisting the entire event was fabricated by the government and media as a way to increase gun restrictions. Truthers have taken to social media and conspiracy Websites to vocalize these beliefs. In some instances, truthers have threatened victims and the families of victims resulting in legal action being taken against the truthers.

A well-known and vocal conspiracy theorist, known as Alex Jones, started denying that the Sandy Hook crisis occurred as soon as it began. Jones is noteworthy because he leverages his radio show InfoWars, YouTube and other social media to feature his controversial theories and opinions. Through these platforms, Jones has amassed billion of views of his videos on YouTube and 1.7 million followers on just one of his four Facebook pages (Williamson, 2018). Jones is a prime example of truthers because of his visibility. Not only do his channels get millions of views but he is very present in the media as well, often showcased for his controversial and sometimes vulgar statements. Though he has seen wide support, Jones's early and persistent involvement with Sandy Hook resulted in repercussions from the social community in both civilian and corporate capacities. He has had several victims of the crisis sue him for defamation, and he has been dropped by several companies including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Apple,

PayPal and more for violating their hate speech policies. Most or all content posted by Jones was removed from these sites, including all of the videos on his YouTube channel which had more than 2.4 million subscribers and billions of views (Glaser, 2018). YouTube was one of Jones's primary platforms where he presented the majority of his arguments. Despite this rejection, Jones has pledged to keep promoting his message and insists that he is even more popular because he is being attacked (Nicas, 2018). The repercussions seem to only fuel him, making him believe he is on the right track otherwise people would not lash out.

## **PREVIOUS LITERATURE**

### **Kategoria Discourse**

Kategoria, also known as rhetoric of accusation focuses on strategies for persuasive attack and details the nature of attacks against an individual or organization (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, 172). Benoit and Dorries (1996) organized a taxonomy of kategoria strategies under two key objectives: increasing perceived responsibility of the accused and increasing perceived offensiveness of the act. In this case, strategies of increasing the target's perceived responsibility for the act are of particular interest. As described by Benoit and Dorries (1996) accusers can increase perceived responsibility of the accused by claiming the accused: committed the act before, planned the act, knew likely consequences of the act and benefitted from the act. The basis of Sandy Hook truthers claims aligns with the strategies of persuasive attack to increase perceived responsibility for the act. Truthers are ultimately trying to portray the government and media as responsible for the Sandy Hook shooting by denying the crisis took place at all or by claiming that the reported facts are highly suspicious or distorted. Benoit and Dorries (1996) second key objective focuses on increasing the targets perceived offensiveness of the act. The taxonomy used for this objective include highlighting the: extent of the damage, the persistence of negative effects, the effects on the audience, inconsistencies, that the victims are innocent/helpless, and the obligation to protect victims. In this analysis, increasing perceived offensiveness of the act is not as useful for categorizing Alex Jones's attack strategies because increasing perceived offensiveness focuses on the negative effects on the audience which are inherently left out of Jones's videos. Rather this taxonomy would be seen in the public's response to Alex Jones's attack strategies instead of within Alex Jones's videos themselves.

Kategoria's counterpart is apologia, which focuses on strategies for defending oneself against accusations. Strategies for apologia involve taking some level of responsibility for the claims. This is where apologia fails in the context of truthers. In crisis denials propagated by truthers, the government and the media are accused of falsely creating and reporting accounts of crises. Thus, when the accused has no level of responsibility for the accused event, apologia will not be a useful response strategy. Instead, I offer that kategoria-based apologia is better suited as a defense. Hearit (2011) uses kategoria-based apologia as a way to defend oneself against the criticism of others by establishing a counterattack. He concludes that to effectively establish a kategoria-based apologia, the counter attacker must: (1) explain why the charges are false and by implication, why said media would level false charges and (2) offer a defense of the product nonetheless; to do otherwise would be seen as begging the question" (p.245). When used correctly, Hearit offers that this strategy "can be an important resource in challenging inaccurate and/or misleading media coverage" (p. 246). Up until this point, truthers were relatively unopposed, leaving victims and their family members as the only responders to truthers' claims. Why officials are not responding is most likely the result of several factors such as a failure to recognize the impact hoaxers can have on victims and a lack in knowledge of how to counter the claims of hoaxers. Since responses to denial of a crisis even occurring has rarely been the focus of theory and literature to date, a formulated response is essentially an expansion of existing crisis communication theory.

### **Crisis Evolution Stages**

The main idea behind crisis evolution is that "under the disorder and disruption of a crisis there is an identifiable and even predictable order and pattern" (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013, 27).

This order and pattern is the basis for the various phases in stage theory. The number of stages varies depending on which model is selected. However, the same underlying premise remains consistent. The three stage model perhaps best exemplifies the progression of stages. It suggests that there is a pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Though other models break these stages up into more well defined stages, these three stages are the common denominator in all the models.

Post-crisis is the stage of particular interest to this case study. Rather than having hoaxes that start in pre-crisis and turn into a crisis, the hoax is now first occurring in the post-crisis stage. Previous research has divided the post-crisis stage into several progressive stages. For example, in Fink's Four-Stage Cycle, he offers a chronic stage and resolution stage. His chronic stage is described as the cleanup phase and is the time of recovery, self-analysis or self-doubt and healing (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). This stage is indeterminate in length and can linger for years or decades. The resolution stage then implies some level of success in healing (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). According to current stage theory, crises have a warning, the crisis event and then recovery. But truthers potentially disrupt the flow of stages by preventing resolution or renewal from occurring. Rather than healing, learning from and moving on from the crisis, victims of the crisis are faced with the continuing confrontation in the post-crisis stage, unable to move on from chronic to resolution stage. It can be argued that the presence of truthers is changing what have come to be a predicted series of stages. The ramifications of such could mean revising stage theory in a way that accounts for truthers preventing resolution and renewal and even pushing people back into crisis mode. Either more stages or more response strategies are needed for current theories to account for the crisis communication demands created by truthers.

## **Hoaxes and Crisis**

In the past, hoaxes have been an event in which a source of misleading information or false claims with the intention of deception is spread and evolve into a crisis. Hoaxes are often manifested as attacks on a specific organization's reputation. But truthers have altered the meaning of hoax. In this instance, hoax claims are established post-crisis, rather than as the cause of the crisis. This repositioning of hoax claims has been evident with recent events such as the Las Vegas and Parkland, Florida, mass shooting incidents. Following a tragic crisis like mass shootings, truthers try to turn the crisis into a hoax through denial that the event even occurred. False claims or hoaxes may not constitute real threats because the organization knows the claims are false, but if the public perceives the claims as accurate, a hoax can still manifest into a new crisis or disrupt the healing process. When the hoax is being claimed post-crisis, it may force crisis survivors to relive the terrifying moments of the crisis repeatedly in an effort to defend the reality of their tragic experience. By denying victims the ability to move on and in some instances threatening victims, truthers may create a catalyst for a second crisis to occur. Rebecca Madeira, vice president of public affairs for Pepsi-Cola, points out that "whether or not a hoax is credible is not nearly as important as whether the public thinks it is possible" (Veil et al., 2011, 329).

## METHOD

The goal for this study was to better comprehend the strategies used in crisis denial videos from the perspective of kategoria. Because this study is applied in nature, I selected a case study approach. Yin (2018) explains that case studies are “generalizable to theoretical propositions” when the “goal will be to expand and generalize theories” (pp. 20-21). These theoretical propositions establish “analytical priorities” for the research (p. 168). Thus, a case study approach was fitting because my objective for this study was to expand the theoretical understanding of how crises evolve, particularly in reaction to claims of crisis denial. I selected the Sandy Hook school shooting as a case to observe how crisis denial impacts the progression through crisis stages. Sandy Hook is a fitting case because of its high visibility, tragic outcome and the fact that truthers have dedicated considerable effort to questioning its authenticity. Following Yin’s (2018) advice, I allowed the propositions from kategoria to “organize our entire analysis, point to relevant contextual conditions to be described as well as explanations to be examined” (p. 169).

### **Data Set**

The data set for the case study consisted of three videos posted by Alex Jones, a notable conspiracy theorist and speaker, focusing on Sandy Hook. Alex Jones was selected for two reasons: a) Jones is a frequent and impactful source of claims that the Sandy Hook shooting was a hoax. In fact, he is currently being sued by several parents of children killed in the Sandy Hook tragedy for defamation (Martinez, 2018); and b) Jones’s YouTube program, INFOWARS.com, was estimated at the time the study began to have 2.4 million subscribers (Glaser, 2018). Jones’s videos claiming Sandy Hook was a hoax were particularly popular. In the fall of 2018, however,

YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, PayPal, and Apple determined that Jones had crossed the line between free speech and hate speech. All of these platforms removed all of Jones’s content (Martinez, 2018). Days prior to YouTube removing Jones’s videos, however, I was able to download three of Jones’s most viewed videos focused specifically on Sandy Hook. The videos I was able to obtain were viewed a combined total of more than 1.5 million times on YouTube (see Table 1). Focusing on the YouTube videos is reasonable due to the many times they were viewed and the fact that a recent PEW report indicated that more Americans have access to YouTube than any other form of social media (Smith & Anderson, 2018).

**Table 1.**

**Alex Jones YouTube Videos on Sandy Hook**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Views</b>	<b>Date</b>
Why People Think Sandy Hook is a Hoax	810,101	1/27/2013
Alex Jones Final Statement on Sandy Hook	558,649	11/18/2016
Bombshell: Sandy Hook Massacre Was A DHS Illusion Says School Safety Expert	207,214	5/13/2014

**Procedure**

Analysis of the videos was completed in several steps. The videos were, first, transcribed using a closed captioning feature. The transcripts comprised a total of 24 pages of single spaced content. The transcripts were then reviewed by two trained coders using the kategoria taxonomy



created by Benoit and Dorries (1996). The two coders were experienced in the study of kategoria, specifically, and crisis communication, in general. Operational definitions were created for the coders based on the four categories in Benoit and Dorries's (1996) taxonomy of kategoria. A category labeled other was also used. The operational definitions that comprised the code book are as follows:

**Accused Committed the Act Before (ACAB)** is any instance wherein the source presents "evidence," "proof," or otherwise suggests that the target has committed the act before or any suggestion that the target has experience in staging crisis or false media stories. For example, the source says "we've seen them fake things using green screens countless times before, just like the moon landing." The target may even provide "evidence" in the form of a video clip, interview, phone call etc.

**Accused Planned the Act (APA)** is any instance wherein the source suggests that the target has some sort of plan for committing the act or planned steps to take after the act has occurred. For example, the source says the target has emails talking about an event months before it occurred. For example, the speaker asks "how is it possible that right before this happened the principal and teachers just happened to be out of the building, like they already knew what was coming." Or "how did those children know exactly where to go, they didn't even seem frightened. No eight year-old can do that."

**Accused Knew Likely Consequences of the Act (AKCA)** is any instance wherein the source suggests the target knew what consequences and repercussions would happen or occur from the act. For example, the source says something like "9/11 was a power move, they knew what they were doing. They needed a reason to increase budgets on 'security'."

**Accused Benefitted from the Act (ABA)** is any instance wherein the source suggests that the target directly benefits from the act, presented evidence that the target was better off after the event, or suggestions that the act helped the target reach their ulterior motives or ultimate goals. For example, the source says “Isn’t it convenient that this happened and now they have a platform for gun control? This is what they wanted.”

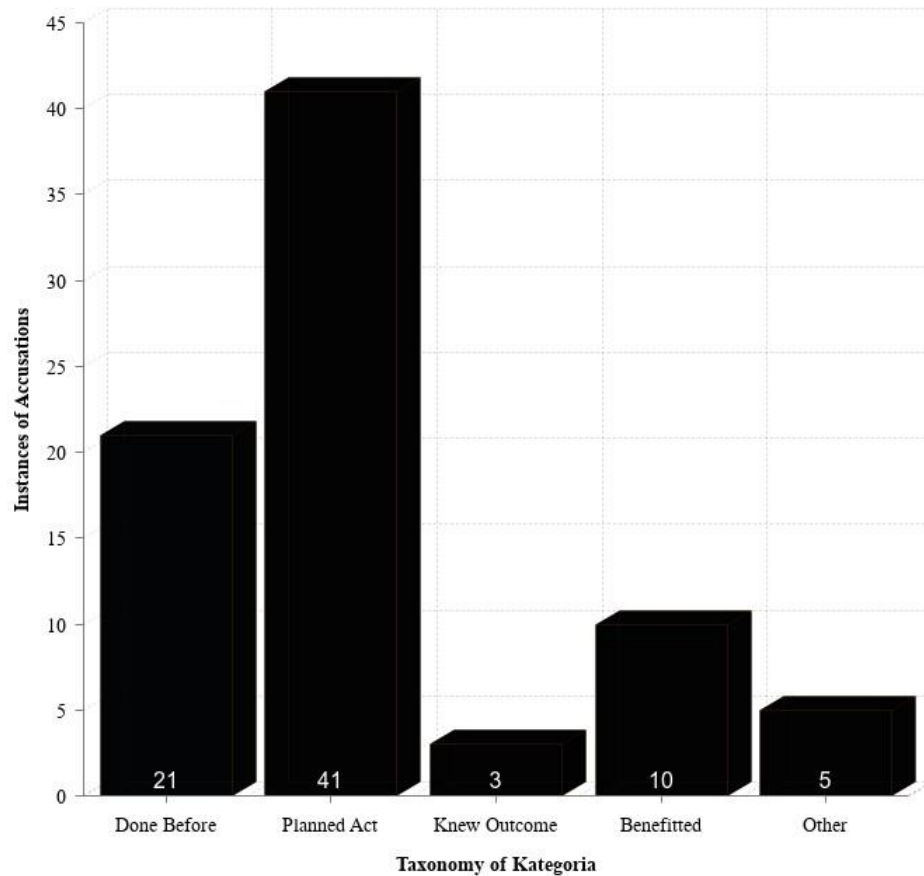
**Other** is an additional category that was added in order to capture any attack strategies not included in the kategoria typology. Such instances could include mentions of the target being avoidant or questions about the reliability of information. For example, the target would refuse to answer a question directly or at all, or the target would ignore attempts of contact from the source.

The two coders were trained over the course of three days using the coding scheme described above. The coders rehearsed the coding process by evaluating a series of hoax denial claims from Jones on a variety of topics that were quoted in print media sources such as the *New York Times*. Each coder independently evaluated all three video transcripts in their entirety. They identified occurrences of each kategoria strategy by marking the reference on the transcript. A single reference was coded from the start of a claim until the speaker changed categories or switched to a different topic. A total of 80 references were identified in the three transcripts. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Scott’s Pi. The coders achieved an acceptable level of reliability at .90 (Krippendorff, 1980). Disagreements among the coders were resolved through discussion.

## DISCUSSION

**Figure 1.**

### **Increasing the Target's Perceived Responsibility for the Act**



### **Accused Committed the Act Before**

There were 21 instances of accusations that the accused committed the act before as shown in Figure 1. Of these 21 instances, four commonalities in the coded instances were apparent. The subthemes include claims of events and crises being staged, direct statements that the accused did it before, accused was caught, and that previous acts were cover-ups.

The most frequently appearing subtheme among all the coded instances for this category focused on claims that varying aspects of the crises were staged. A full list of all crises mentioned and the frequency of how many times each crisis was mentioned can be found in Table 2. There were a total of 11 unique crises used as evidence for the accused committing the act before, with a total of 24 mentions. The most repeatedly referenced crises were CNN reporting in Israel during the Gulf War with six mentions and the Boston Bombing with three mentions. Jones explicitly states that many events were staged, expressing that if gun control advocates had “staged fast and furious the head of Gun Owners of America has said on my own show Larry Pratt that if they'd staged fast and furious that killed thousands our government to blame the Second Amendment they staged anything” (Jones, 2013, Why People Think).

Special attention was given to the idea that since they staged crises before, we can definitively say the accused is staging similar events now. Jones argues this point saying “we know they staged stuff they've staged it before” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). The verbiage of previous and current events being staged is repeated numerous times. Each instance being presented as evidence. Jones goes on to say “And again you look at the Aurora shooting that was totally staged. I don't have an hour to go over the evidence most of you are aware of it all but it was incredible how staged that was” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). Jones aims to erode the inherent trust between the accused and the public by noting other staged events, asking “but when you think about how they staged WMDs to kill over a million Iraqis, do you think about all the other hoaxes, all the other lies, all the other rigging, and the way they're freaking out about it and trying to cover up every level of it” (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones). Jones uses several other events he deems as staged to further support his claim.

**Table 2.**

**Referenced Evidence of Planned Crises**

<b>Planned Crisis</b>	<b>Times Mentioned</b>
CNN reporting in Israel during Gulf War	6
CBS News scripting videos	1
Operation Northwoods	2
Oklahoma City	2
NATO Option / Operation Gladio	1
Fast and Furious	2
Boston Bombing	3
Aurora Shooting	2
Red Cross	2
9/11	2
Robert Kennedy Assassination	1

Another subtheme among these coded instances was the explicit assertion that the accused had a pattern of doing it repeatedly over an extended period of time. Jones used mentions of repetition to express this, saying “And then you see it duplicated over and over again” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). He continues, on arguing that:

CNN was sending that raw feeds out all over the world and people knew how to descramble them and get them and it's on record that CNN did fake scud missile attack videos so they've done it over and over again. (Jones, 2014, Bombshell)

Jones also called out repeated offenders, CNN being a popular target, in the following claim:

So CNN's done it before, I have mainstream news articles here out of the Washington Post, out of WorldNetDaily where CNN had to admit that they had army psychological warfare inside of their system, basically crafting the news. And then of course we have things like Operation Northwoods, where in 1961 the Joint Chiefs came to Kennedy . . . and said we want to stage shootings around America in crowded public places. Like movie theaters, and things and on the street to blame the Soviets as a pretext for war with Cuba. And Kennedy said no. They've had the plan for mass shootings before. (Jones, 2013, Why People Think)

Jones specifically highlights this repetition occurring over several decades, further arguing that the accused has done it before. Jones notes “And they didn't just plan the state shootings in the 60s, 70s, and 80s” (Jones, 2013, Why People Think). This goes beyond the accused committing the act before by arguing that the accused has a pattern of creating such hoaxes, rather than as a one off occurrence.

The expression that the accused has been “caught” was also used repeatedly as a way to insinuate the accused has done the acts before. Jones argues:

But you added all the other things that were happening, and all the other fake news the media has been caught in, and CNN back in 1991 openly faking scud missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and Israel when they were back in Atlanta, and the satellite feeds caught them admitting that it was all fake. We'd be crazy not to question this because bare-minimum, they were faking some of the shots and some of the coverage. (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones)

The word “caught” is used repeatedly in reference to CNN and CBS. Jones insists “CBS News got caught scripting videos as well, and there's a lot of examples of this. So let's go ahead and look at those clips” (Jones, 2013, Why People Think). Jones continues this argument by describing the severity of what he claims are violations:

Now remember that's only a small portion of hours of raw CNN feed. That back in the old days they didn't scramble the big satellite feeds because they thought most people wouldn't have a 12-foot dish to get it. But people did record that, and that's how they got caught with their pants down. And notice that blue screen in the background so they

could project the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem skylines in the background. (Jones, 2013, Why People Think)

Jones tactically used the word “caught” repeatedly in the past tense to reinforce consistent claims that the accused committed the act before.

The last prominent subtheme for this section was verbiage saying previous events were a cover-up. This is fitting because, if there was a cover-up, the accused must have previously done something worth covering-up. Jones explicitly states that people in power have previously created cover-ups saying:

What did they know about federal agents inside planting the bombs in Oklahoma City and it was Attorney General Holder who later ran the false flag of fast and furious who was Deputy Attorney General back in 1995 who ran the cover-up and those emails have come out in different lawsuits that are available online if you'd like to look those up go out and check everything. I'm telling you you're going to find out it's even worse that I'm saying in fact that's what I get criticized for is you know not covering it all this piece of evidence that piece of evidence there's too many. (Jones, 2013, Why People Think)

Again, Jones specifically says a cover-up occurred noting “And I've always said that I'm not sure about what really happened but there's a lot of anomalies, and there has been a cover-up of whatever did happen there” (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones). This idea that the accused committed the act before can strategically erode trust in the accused and insinuate they are more likely to commit similar acts in the future.

### **Accused Planned the Act**

Accused planned the act was by far the most used strategy of *kategoria* with 41 instances as shown in Figure 1. There were four subthemes that became apparent within the coded instances, they were crisis actors, media is complicit, cover up, and reasonable doubt.

The first subtheme identified was crisis actors. Throughout the coded instances for accused planned the act, Jones made frequent mention of the children and police as acting in a

pre-planned event. He made several comments about how there “appears to be people who’ve been coached, people who’ve been given cue cards, people who are behaving like actors” (Jones, 2013, Why People Think). Jones argued further that “the fact that they’re having people script things and that answers are being scripted is incontrovertible” (Jones, 2013, Why People Think). Jones goes on to identify acting techniques he believes were used and commenting on how the identified crisis actors were not taking the performance seriously, expressing that:

You got parents laughing hahaha watch this, and then go on method acting. I mean it’s just ridiculous you got coroner’s to start laughing and I don’t mean uncomfortably I mean like laughing with the State Police when they’re given press conferences. I mean it just is the fakest thing since a three dollar bill. (Jones, 2014, Bombshell)

He identifies several groups as being crisis actors including parents, coroners, police, and even news broadcasters. Jones continues his argument for crisis actors acting in pre-planned events:

So to be clear we point out clear chroma key also known as blue-screen or green-screen being used and we’re demonized. We point out they’re clearly doing fake interviews. We point out that normal emergency procedures weren’t followed, and their answer is to say that we said nobody died. (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones)

Further remarks were made suggesting crisis actors were used in the planned event. Jones expressed his concern saying “but quite frankly, I wish that the official story was true because that’s a lot less scary than them staging something like this” (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones). The use of crisis actors in a pre-planned event was an important argument that Jones frequently mentioned in order to further his claims that the accused planned the act. Identifying acting methods, fake interviews, and scripted answers were some of the many ways these crisis actors were identified.

The next subtheme under accused planned the act was claims that the media is complicit. Jones overtly states numerous times that the media is in on the hoax. He provides evidence of the



media pre-planning broadcasts going along with the hoax by pointing out their use of green screens:

Coming up we've got Anderson Cooper supposedly its Sandy Hook and it's clearly blue screen. I've worked the blue screen 17 years. We've got it right in there, we know what it looks like, we know what the anomalies look like, and we know what happens when you don't tune it properly. It's clearly blue screen and you can draw from that what you want, that's coming up at a moment. (Jones, 2013, Why People Think)

Jones repeatedly refers to the supposed green screen use expressing, "I saw this footage where Anderson Cooper turns, he's supposedly there at Sandy Hook in front of the memorial, and his whole forehead and nose blurs out" (Jones, 2013, Why People Think). Jones makes this point yet again in another video saying, "I mean you got Anderson Cooper in green screens saying he's out there" (Jones, 2014, Bombshell).

Besides the use of green screens, Jones also says the media is complicit by lying about the hoax. Jones claims that:

The media still lies and says he did, and file the lawsuit against Bushmaster. Then we have the bank burning down Adam Lanza's home so no one could buy it and investigate it. They didn't just burn down Adam Lanza's home to get rid of it, they didn't just seal all the records, no no, when they demolish the school they made everybody that was part of it signed non-disclosures and then this Agatha Christie whodunit gets even weirder. Rob Dues' uncle, respected FBI agent that runs his own big security firm is at the foyer meeting that our reporters at, and tells our reporter he's never seen anything like this before concerning the cover-up. (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones)

He further supports this claim later by reflecting:

When I sit there and read quotes of other people saying they believe it's staged the media knows full well they take that out of context, and have me definitively saying it. When I've always said I don't know what happened there, but it needs to be looked into. And why should anybody fear an investigation if they have nothing to hide? In fact isn't that in Shakespeare's Hamlet "me thinks you protest too much. (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones)

Jones ultimately points out the use of green screens and false messages used by the media to further his claims that the media is complicit with the hoax and are even aiding the cover-up.

Another subtheme used by Jones claims that the evidence surrounding the case, including police reports is part of a cover up. Jones repeatedly states outright that there is a cover-up, but also implies it in a more nuanced way. Direct claims consist of Jones saying “the cover up is the prima facie proof of the larger crime, and that we’re being lied to” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). He later implies that the police, media, and school board are all aware of the cover up. In a discussion with his guest, Wolfgang, Jones expresses that:

Oh they’re all working together it’s a cover up no doubt well they better watch it listen we’re gonna come back and play the report that we put together and it’s got your comments of powerful information to the school board thank you for the work that you’re doing sir we’ll continue to track everything you’re up to and god bless you. (Jones, 2014, Bombshell)

Jones continues to say that Sandy Hook was a cover-up throughout the videos, but he does so through implications rather than using the exact phrase “cover-up.” Wolfgang also implies it is a cover up in his conversation with Jones, arguing that the Sandy Hook school:

. . . is a toxic waste dump. when you look at the data and here's what they didn't realize they put it in their own newspaper before they demolish that Sandy Hook had the highest level of lead paint throughout the entire school. Sandy Hook has a highest level of asbestos in the ceiling tiles and ceiling. It has a highest level of PCP and the groundwater is contaminated. Now here's the question, Connecticut law requires that every parent must be notified of those hazardous chemicals because they have serious health effects on children which may not be seen five until five years later now why would any parent why would those 18 of the 20 parents that moved into Newtown in 2009 enroll your child in the school with all those hazardous chemical . . . parents just don't do that they don't expose little children to chemical hazards. (Wolfgang, 2014, Bombshell)

Jones used media headlines and sealed case records to further his argument. Jones leveraged the fact that files were sealed in the Sandy Hook case as evidence for the cover-up. He insisted that if they have to seal the records it’s because they are hiding something. He expresses this idea by saying:

We got the surveillance footage all released. They sealed the surveillance footage, they sealed the death certificates, they sealed everything in Connecticut, like it was more

secret than the Manhattan Project. This has never been done in any other case. Look at the headlines: “privacy versus transparency Connecticut bans access to many homicide records post Newtown;” “School shooting expert threatened over Sandy Hook investigation. Feds came to his house you name it said you better drop it;” “Newtown destroys suspected Sandy Hook shooters home.” (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones)

He continues by contrasting the events at Sandy Hook with what he characterizes as legitimate crises for parents who have truly lost children:

But this particular case, they are so scared of investigation. So everything they do basically ends up blowing up at their face. So you guys are going to get what you want now, I'm going to start reinvestigating Sandy Hook, everything else that happened with it. I'm Alex Jones signing off from inforwars.com. If you're watching this transmission, think for yourself. I know it's a thought crime. And then ask yourself what is it so strange about Sandy Hook and that tragedy? But I will say this finally, my heart does go out to all parents that lose children whether it's stabbings, or whether it's to car wrecks or whether it's to strangling's or whether it's to blunt-force trauma or murder, firearms, whatever the case is. I'm a parent and my heart goes out to all parents that have lost children in these tragic events. And so if children were lost in Sandy Hook my heart goes out to each and every one of those parents, and the people that say they're parents that I see on the news. The only problem is, I've watched a lot of soap operas, and I've seen actors perform. And I know when I'm watching the movie, I don't want to watching something real. Let's look at the Sandy Hook. (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones)

Jones emphasizes that the accused wants to avoid further investigation to keep their cover up intact, and though he expresses condolences for those who may have been lost in the tragedy, he makes clear that he questions if anyone actually died and that he thinks the whole thing was staged like a movie set. This series of arguments directly relates back to the overarching category of accused planned the act.

The final subtheme for this section is reasonable doubt. Jones points to a series of facts that he claims establish a reasonable doubt that the crisis occurred. He does so by describing certain events surrounding the tragedy and presenting them in a way that he believes logically should make his viewers question how things occurred. Jones's conversation with his guest, Wolfgang, presents these ideas definitively. Wolfgang contends that:

Until they answer those questions I can tell you children did not die, teachers did not die on December 14, 2012. It just could not have happened and it's in their words it's not what Wolfgang thinks or is just my opinion it's what they say I mean their own words actually show that it could not have happened. Who declares 27 people legally dead within a minute? Nobody does that. Who has a 99.9 percent kill rate shooting children in a school within eight minutes? There isn't an FBI agent, there isn't a Navy SEAL that's that good of a shot within eight minutes and then kill himself. I mean that's reasonable doubt. I mean that in itself is reasonable doubt to show that the laser could not have done that. I mean he's an autistic child. He's got Asperger's. Alex, nobody has a 99.9 percent kill rate, not even the New York police. (Wolfgang, 2014, Bombshell)

This subtheme specifically questions the actions of those involved with the intention of making the crisis seem improbable. Jones questions the children as well as police and the media expressing that:

I don't know if the moon landings were faked, but I don't put anything past these anti-gunners. And early on that day we watched footage of kids going in circles in and out of the building. You'd be running them away from the building. Emergency helicopters weren't called; instead porta-potties were prepared for the press within hours of the event. I saw the helicopters that did respond, the police helicopters, saying that there were men or a man in the woods in camouflage. The media later said that was a conspiracy theory. So early on I'm like, well I saw local news of the guy in the woods and they took him in custody. Now they're saying it never happened. So that shows there's some of a cover-up happening. And then I saw Anderson Cooper, I've been in TV for 20-something years I know a blue-screen or green-screen, turn and his nose disappear. Then I saw clearly that they were using footage on the green-screen looped because it would show flowers and other things during other broadcasts that were moving and then basically cutting to the same piece of footage. Then I saw CNN do faked satellite interviews with reporters clearly with the same traffic and the same cars right behind them conducting the interview face to face. Then we see footage of one of the reported fathers of the victims Robbie Parker doing classic acting training where he's laughing and joking and they say "hey we're live" he goes "oh." And maybe that's real, I'm sure it is. (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones)

In this instance, Jones lays out the events as being abnormal to proper protocol for a situation such as Sandy Hook. He argued that when they forgo actions that seem reasonable, such as calling emergency helicopters, and rather set up green screens and report contradictory information it is actually evidence of the larger cover-up and implies that those involved, planned the act. This section was central to the development of Jones's overall argument. He

relied on these subthemes in an attempt to persuade his viewers that the accused did indeed plan the act.

### **Accused Knew Likely Consequences of the Act**

With three coded instances of accusations, accused knew likely consequences of the act was Jones's least used strategy in the taxonomy of kategoria. All coded instances suggested that the accused knew they could leverage the crisis as a means for taking away American rights, more specifically relating to gun control and the freedom of speech. Special concern was given to gun rights, with Jones claiming "they're clearly using this to go after our guns" (Jones, 2013, Why People Think). This idea is reinforced again in a later video where, during a conversation with Wolfgang, Wolfgang expresses that "Sandy Hook is taking away our guns across the country. Sandy Hook is messing with our freedom of speech that's not the America that we unite, no Alex" (Wolfgang, 2014, Bombshell). Jones makes his thoughts about guns clear, saying:

So here is my statement for the media when they call up saying where do you stand on this? Where I've always stood. When there were other mass shootings, I would simply point out that they're very rare statistically, and why should we all give up our rights because some other bad person does something? A guy with a car runs over 50 people that we ban driving cars? It's the same thing, and there have been other instances of shootings that are very suspicious. (Jones, 2016, Alex Jones)

Jones suggests that the crisis was faked with the knowledge that it could have ramifications on gun control law. His argument implicates the accused as part of a plan where they knew what they were doing.

## **Accused Benefitted from the Act**

There were 10 instances of accusations that the accused benefitted from the act as shown in Figure 1. All of the claims of such benefits came from one of the coded videos entitled, “Bombshell: Sandy Hook Massacre Was A DHS Illusion Says School Safety Expert.” The overarching theme that crossed all 10 of the coded instances was Jones saying the accused benefitted by collecting money from crises for themselves or to give to anti-gun groups. Coded instances include accusations against United Way where Jones states that “United Way and others that famously suck up the Oklahoma City money, the 9/11 money for themselves, give it to anti-gun groups” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). Jones continued the attack saying, “United Way, Red Cross, I mean they're just vicious organizations” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). Later, Jones repeats that “money that has been poured in the Sandy Hook town because of this incident it all starts at the United Way Western Connecticut who actually I mean you saw the advertised three days before the shooting” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell).

Jones emphasized that money was at the center of the crisis stating that “this is all about the money.” He further claimed that, “they're recruiting funds from major corporations” and continued saying, “if they are soliciting money under false pretenses than they need to be very very careful” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). Jones’s guest speaker, Wolfgang, further emphasized the misuse of the money raised by saying:

twenty nine million dollars you got the United Way and you have promise and there are 39 other community nonprofit organizations within new town which received a lot of funds for an example the animal shelter in new Sandy Hook Alex they got four hundred and fifty thousand dollars from the Sandy Hook shooting what does an animal shelter have to do with this. (Wolfgang, 2014, Bombshell)

Jones expressed that the towns’ complacency was also a result of misusing funds raised after the crisis by saying “I understand you're saying a motive for the locals to go along with the fraud is

money” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). Jones argued further that “Bloomberg was saying “get ready” the day before you're ready to fundraise on mass shootings. You know, on your mark get set, boom pull the trigger” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). Jones later repeated his thoughts on how the accused raises money from crises to give to other political groups expressing how “They raised hundreds of millions of dollars, billions in the case of 9/11, collecting money off of people's goodwill and then giving it to anti-gun groups. The United Way is an anti-gun cesspit” (Jones, 2014, Bombshell). In all of these instances, Jones expresses that the accused benefitted by eliciting funds from the crisis to use for their personal agenda, namely to support anti-gun groups. Though there were fewer instances, these statements were important for suggesting the accused has ulterior motives.

## **Other**

This additional category meant to capture any attack strategies not included in the kategoria typology had five instances of accusations. Among these instances, two common subthemes surfaced. Jones expressed repeatedly that the accused avoided answering questions. Examples of such instances all came from Jones’s video entitled “Bombshell: Sandy Hook Massacre Was a DHS Illusion Says School Safety Expert.” In this video, Jones’s conversation with Wolfgang, lead his guest to argue that:

I mean I'm getting threats all the time I got some crazy people out there you know they're attacking my wife they're attacking me and everything else but you know what all they have to do is answer sixteen simple questions. (Wolfgang, 2014, Bombshell)

Jones later said, “I’ve interviewed not one but two one of them was a EMT the other a cop and boy did they get threatened over it they wouldn't even do more interviews after it” (Jones, 2014,

Bombshell). Wolfgang further argued that “now nobody ever donates another dime the United Way until they answer every question” (Wolfgang, 2014, Bombshell).

Jones also put emphasis on investigating and questioning the information given by the accused. This was evident in his video entitled, “Why People Think Sandy Hook Is a Hoax.” Jones states “so we can’t be attacked, and others can’t be attacked for questioning known liars” (Jones, 2013, Why People Think). Jones essentially is building a case that the accused cannot be trusted. He later argues:

The corporate state-run media calls anybody that questions the official propaganda that’s pumped out by the government in the dinosaur media as conspiracy theorists. And that’s just a way to demonize your opposition and to try to get weak minded people to not investigate the information the alternative media is putting out. (Jones, 2013, Why People Think)

By attacking the validity of the accused words, Jones is advancing his claim that there is a reason why people should question what the accused says. Ultimately Jones is suggesting that the accused is trying to manipulate or control the public to get what they want.



## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

From the analysis of this data, several conclusions can be drawn. First, a clear pattern can be seen in the nature of attack. Claims that a crisis is planned and was done before were the primary means by which truthers attack and claim that crises are hoaxes. These are areas of emphasis, from which the source based most of his attacks. The attacks are consistent and align with one another, in that if someone planned a crisis, it is reasonable to believe that they have done so before in other situations. The source uses claims that the accused has done it before as a means to weave his claims into other crises, using them as support to further his arguments. The source also uses the claim that the crisis was planned as a way to present his own evidence as proof. Accused planned the act and accused committed the act before were fittingly the most used attacks because they are the most incriminating and most direct ways to attack the accused compared to the other categories. These claims also provide an easy way to combat claims that refute your own. Specifically, by claiming the act was planned and part of an ongoing pattern of deceit, Jones and other truthers can refute any rebuttal as just another part of the larger plan.

Second, the situation created by crisis denial also affects crisis stage theory. The attacker's claims that they have done it before deny closure to not only the crisis in question but also the crises that the attacker uses as evidence of the accused having committed the act previously. These claims prevent those impacted by the crisis from moving on to resolution. Accused planned the act also contributes to denying closure in that the debate seems endless. Both parties are forced to go back and forth contesting evidence for and against the crisis. This essentially traps those impacted by the crisis into a chronic stage where they remain in a constant and endless re-evaluation of the events without resolution as the goal. This cycle is the result of

broad claims that everyone is involved with the cover up. Saying everyone is involved in the cover up fundamentally incriminates anyone speaking out in defense of the Sandy Hook victims.

Third, the very definition of hoax is also challenged by the crisis denial process. Before the rise of truthers, a hoax was the crisis with such false claims as bomb threats or financial schemes. Now truthers have flipped the script to crisis as hoax. Whereas a hoax used to be an event in which a source of misleading or false information with the intention of deception is spread and turns into a crisis, hoax claims are now being established post crisis through denial of the well-documented crises occurred at all. A whole new type of hoax response is needed to deal with attacks of crisis as hoax. Previous methods to negate a hoax involved proving false claims wrong while taking action in case they are true (Hearit, 2011). This approach is not helpful in responding to crisis denial. Similarly, providing further evidence that the crisis did occur is likely to only stimulate further accusations of complicity from truthers.

Finally, the situation is not, however, hopeless for crisis victims facing claims of crisis denial. Although many of the existing forms of apologia such as denying the claims of truthers and attacking the accusers are, as discussed above, likely to only exacerbate the attacks, arguments that transcend the crisis may be more effective. Victims and relevant organizations can engage in arguments that transcend the specific attacks to the greater debate of free speech versus defamation. Benoit (2018) explains that the value of transcendence is its capacity to place the discussion in a context where “more important values” are emphasized (p. 14). For the victims of Sandy Hook, this transcendence invites the public to consider a continuum questioning where truthers’s claims are no longer considered free speech, or the expression of their own opinions, and where they cross the line to defamation of crisis victims. In the Sandy Hook case, the debate is no longer about the evidence shared, but rather the focus is shifted to the

absurdity of the truthers's claims and the resulting harm to the victims singled out for ridicule. The promise of transcendence in response to hoaxers is evident in the fact that multiple defamation cases filed by parents of Sandy Hook victims are advancing through the courts system (Martinez, 2018). The decision by YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, PayPal, and Apple to deny Jones access to their Internet platforms due to decisions that his attacks had reached the level of hate speech (Nicas, 2018) is further evidence that transcending to the more important issues has potential for rebutting crisis denial claims. Although this strategy appears promising, more research is needed to determine the appropriate contexts and strategies for transcending crisis denial claims.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study was completed with several limitations. First, because the study focused exclusively on crisis denial, the analysis was limited to the segment of kategoria theory focusing on the target's perceived responsibility for the act. Crisis denial claims typically contend that someone falsely created the crisis. Thus, the arguments establishing crisis denial inherently focus on establishing responsibility for the act. Future research could, however, focus on how crisis denial claims seek to increase the perceived offensiveness of the act. Second, the study focused on only three of Jones's videos accounting for approximately 1.5 million views. The fact that the videos are no longer publicly available prohibits expanding this sample. Additional claims and accusations may have been present on the videos that have now been removed from public platforms.

## **CONCLUSION**

The growing prevalence of crisis denial has the potential to disrupt the crisis recovery process for victims. This study revealed that the claims by Jones and other truthers have the potential to lure victims into a cycle of attack and denial where the counter-evidence victims provide is simply seen as further evidence of complicity in the hoax and cover up. The hope is that by revealing the nature and implications of crisis denial claims, individuals and organizations are better prepared to confront and refute them. Transcendence shows potential for combatting the claims of truthers, particularly when the claims are defamatory or hateful in nature. Ultimately, comprehending, developing, and sharing effective strategies for responding to crisis denial can bring relief to crisis victims who have been denied the resolution they need to heal.

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