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The Emerging Role of New Media in Global Crisis Communications

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The Emerging Role of New Media in Global Crisis Communications

by

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Abstract

Social media channels operate in real-time and on a global scale. Yet many organizations remain unskilled and/or unprepared in digital communication usage, which exposes the organization and its brand to grave and long-term consequences. Through an in-depth literature review, this thesis explores theoretical research on both organizational crisis management and the practice of international public relations. It also reviews several organizational crisis cases where social media played a critical role in either inciting or escalating a crisis issue, positioning the crisis prominently on a national or global level. Next by engaging in case study research of two internationally recognized brands, this thesis examined how these organizations applied prescribed crisis response strategies, utilized social media as a crisis communication tool, and managed the crisis issue on a global scale. Findings indicate a variance in overall crisis management, and incongruence between public relations theory and practice. The thesis concludes with best practices for implementing a global crisis communication strategy using social media, and discusses global implications for the public relations field.

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Chapter 1

Warren Buffet once famously said, “It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it” (Quirke, 2010). Protecting one’s brand reputation is arguably the most important cause for any organization; and when a crisis emerges, communication scholars agree that the decisions made and actions taken will affect an organization, and its brand, for a long time to come (Zalabak, 2009). For the hundreds of organizations directly or indirectly impacted by a crisis each year, especially those with internationally recognized brands, the ability to effectively manage both internal and external communications has required the help of professionally trained experts. Consequently, by establishing a reputation for having this valuable expertise, the public relations industry has been thriving for decades (Toth, 2008). Yet as information technology quickly evolves, remarkably changing how the world communicates, organizations and the public relations professionals who represent these organizations, have struggled to keep up with the rapid pace and global reach of emerging media channels (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). As a result, organizational issues have been incited or have escalated to a crisis-level, and brand reputations are now highly vulnerable to vastly publicized scrutiny.

Through an in-depth review of scholarly research on crisis communications and by examining the emerging role or impact of new media as it pertains to a host of organizational crises, this thesis explores the congruence between the ideals of research-based communication theory and the current practice of crisis communications in an online, global environment. Further, by closely studying two specific crisis cases involving well-known international brands, this paper will analyze the organizations’ management of the crisis event, and it will detail how the organization, the global media, and other global publics "reported" on the respective crisis. This analysis includes a review of highly-cited theoretical crisis communication frameworks, and questions whether these sufficiently address the challenges of crisis management in today's online, global environment where most key publics have access to new media communication tools. Finally, implications for public relations professionals as protectors and defenders of an organization's global brand will be discussed.

To begin, it is quite evident that organizations, large and small, have embraced new technologies to help make various business practices much more efficient and effective. However, there is also evidence that these same organizations have been slower to embrace certain communication technologies, specifically new media channels, partly because companies still lack the necessary internal talent and/or ability for using social media as an effective communication tool. In fact, a *PRWeek* survey found that one-third of organizations (all sizes) indicated that no one – not a staff member or an external agency partner – was currently responsible for engaging in social media activity on behalf of the organization (Daniels, 2010). Without dedicated resources in staff and in budget, and without an established social media policy for how the company's employees can engage in social networks, companies have become greatly exposed to crises that are incited or escalated through these new media channels. A 2011 study by Burson-Marsteller, a global public relations firm, highlighted "the overall state of unreadiness" despite the fact that most survey respondents (business decision-makers from all over the world and from all sized organizations) agreed that the rise of digital communications has increased companies' vulnerability to a crisis (Lawrence, 2011, para. 6). Some of the survey's alarming findings included: (a) 79% of respondents believed that their organization is less than 12 months away from a potential crisis; (b) only half have an organizational crisis plan and, of the half that do, most noted that there are gaps that must be addressed; and (c) only one third have a digital crisis communications plan yet 81% of business decision-makers believe that new media's role in "driving reputation" (brand perception) during a crisis is on the rise. One business expert commented that the results of this survey should serve as a "wake-up call" for all business leaders who are responsible for defending corporate reputations and brand equity (Lawrence, para. 1). Lawrence concluded, "We are now all in the business of crisis management. It is not a matter of whether we will stumble online but of when we will each have our moment" (2011, para. 17).

Preparation is the first step. Historically, it has been considered a best practice for organizations to create crisis management plans to ensure the organization is well-prepared to strategically address a wide range of potential issues. It has been argued that most issues can be anticipated by an organization because *someone* in the organization is already aware of the potential threat (Grunig et al., 1992). However over the last ten years in the United States alone, some of the greatest organizational crisis issues were outcomes of devastating events such as the terrorist attack on September 11th, the Northeast blackout in 2003, and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Crises such as these were not the result of anything within a company's immediate control; yet thousands of businesses, which include their employees and their customers, were dramatically affected by these events.

After the September 11th terrorist attack, the rationale for revising an organization's pre-existing crisis plan was apparent. Certainly prior to this date, it was highly unlikely that any company's crisis plan considered how to continue doing business if all planes in the Unites States were grounded, if all cell phone communications were cut off, and if electronic banking was made impossible. In fact, it is well documented that during this crisis and others such as Hurricane Katrina, most organizations had limited ability to communicate with their employees, customers, and other key publics (Argenti, 2002). Many organizations recognized the need to revise their plans after September 11th but then, four years later, were faced with Hurricane Katrina. Two researchers who studied "post 9/11" crisis communication plans commented, "Unfortunately, much of the knowledge corporations gained from dealing with the aftermath of the terrorist attacks was either forgotten or misused during the crisis following Hurricane Katrina" (Hurley-Hanson & Giannantonio, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, business continuity may have been a major concern for companies after September 11th but the immediate actions taken did not match the level of concern. In fact, these same researchers referenced a 2004 report, "Disaster Planning in the Private Sector: A Post 9/11 Look at the State of Business Continuity in the U.S.," which found that, overall, organizations were still unprepared for disaster, with 25% of the 1000 responding executives indicating their organization did not yet have a crisis response plan in place (p. 4).

Perhaps this provides some insight as to why many large organizations have been equally slow to react to the issues emerging from new media. For the past decade, many business leaders have taken the "ostrich approach" (Burson-Marsteller, 2011), viewing new media as a passing fad or a means for family and friends to connect and share photos. Yet during this same timeframe, the emergence of blogs and social media – from

Facebook to Twitter to YouTube - has been the impetus for both positive and negative brand discussions as consumers welcome the opportunity to share experiences and vent frustrations. "Word-of-mouth" marketing is a growing trend and according to recent research from McKinsey & Company, consumers are 50 times more likely to buy a product after hearing a recommendation from a trusted source (Stein, 2011). But this practice works both ways. With traditional media now fueled by the 24/7 digital news cycle, these online conversations have become viral and have often resulted in national and even global media attention. In fact, one person's lone, critical voice can spark an outcry of disapproval, impacting the future buying decisions of hundreds or even thousands. Dell, the computer giant, found this out the hard way. In a series of "Dell Hell" blog posts, Jeff Jarvis single-handedly took down a brand during the summer of 2005 (Jarvis, 2005). As more frustrated customers joined in his blog vent, the national media began to cover the discussion. In one month's time, Dell's brand status for their best-selling notebooks (the item Jarvis had purchased) had dropped by 5% - taking it from first place to second place (DiCarlo, 2005). In another infamous case, a blogger posted a 21-minute taped phone conversation of his trying to cancel his AOL service. AOL chose not to respond to his blog, yet the blogger's rants became so popular that he received national media attention from *The New York Times* and *The Today Show* (Penenberg, 2008). Although Dell clearly learned a lesson from this experience, and consequently made significant changes to its internal and external communication practices, other organizations have not followed their lead. One might expect that any other organization motivated by profit would want to avoid the public outcry experienced by Dell or AOL. Yet, years later, there are still many otherwise savvy organizations that surprisingly fail to appreciate the global reach of online "voices" (from customers to public interest groups) and how quickly these voices can reach multiple key publics (Friedman, 2011). Certainly more organizations are experimenting with social media, including creating Facebook fan pages in attempts to attract and secure loyal customers. But many still appear ill-equipped to handle—and, further, defiant toward—social media postings or comments (e.g. BP and Netflix which are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2). The outcome of such poor new media management continues to result in negative brand publicity on a grand scale. Additionally, such issues result in stories that never truly "go away" – living perpetually in an online environment. Consequently, when a future or potential customer is shopping via the Internet and seeking current or previous customers' opinions, that new customer will readily find out about any past issues or concerns with a brand or its products through the simple click of a button.

In order to fully appreciate the impact new media can have on an organization's brand and its global operations, particularly during a crisis event, it is imperative to recognize the changing media landscape. *The Economist* magazine recently noted that if Facebook were a nation, it would be the world's third most populous following China and India (Aula, 2010). And *The Washington Post* referred to Twitter as a "'democratizing force' since it can quickly propel unknown individuals and their causes into the public eye" (WashingtonPost.com, 2011). Indeed with Facebook's 845 million total users (McNaughton, 2012), Twitter's 500 million total users (McNaughton, 2012), and YouTube's 4 billion views per day (Radic, 2012), social media cannot be ignored by any industry, especially public relations. New media usage by average, every-day consumers continues to trend upward as Pew Internet research now reports that 50% of all American adults are using social networking sites (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). And avid Twitter users include celebrities, professional athletes, and political figures from local congressmen to the President of the United States.

Interestingly, new media have also changed many past practices of traditional media. Sriramesh and Vercic (2009) noted that as Information Communication Technologies (ICT's) give rise to social media outlets such as blogs and video sharing, thus changing the dynamics of access to media, many leading print media organizations have needed to alter the way they report the news (p. 74). The same is now true for broadcast media as most cable news organizations scroll related yet random Twitter comments across the bottom of the television screen, and radio announcers frequently tell listeners to "friend us" on Facebook. Arguably, the biggest change impacting the public relations industry is the use of new media by journalists. For decades, the relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners has been contentious yet mutually beneficial (Sriramesh and Vercic, 2009). A 2011 study from Middleberg Communications and the Society for New Communications Research found that although journalists do not want to be contacted via Twitter, 69 percent of them (mostly from the United States) said that they use Twitter as a reporting/sourcing tool (Robbins, 2011). This particular finding is up 21 percent from 2010. Further, Waters, Tindall, and Morton (2010) reported that the use of social media have led to a role reversal between journalists and public relations professionals in that the former are now "pitching" the latter. By using "media catching" services such as ProfNet and HARO (Help-a-Reporter-Out), journalists will seek out specific information for news stories. Therefore public relations professionals now must redirect their efforts to better facilitate online conversations between the organization and journalists across the globe.

Although traditional media strategies are not defunct, the paradigm shift is evident. The phenomenon of *media witnessing* has now turned "anyone with mobile media technology into a potential testimony-producer" (Frosh and Pinchevski, 2009, p. 300). More specifically, a person no longer simply witnesses an event; she or he actually produces the crisis report. In fact, it has been well-documented that Facebook was a significant tool that enabled activists to mobilize and share information during the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East, even though Facebook's management remained ambivalent regarding its use for political mobilization (Preston, 2011). Additionally, social media are now fundamental to organizing collective action. During the 2010 crisis in Haiti, people from all over the world were able to text and tweet donations to help the earthquake victims.

But with this paradigm shift of consumers as journalists and journalists as bloggers, examples emerge nearly every day of organizations floundering in their management of social networks or other online media. For instance, while the aforementioned Middle East uprisings were taking place, the global shoe company Kenneth Cole sent a tweet stating, "Millions are in an uproar in Cairo. Rumor is they heard our new spring collection is now available online" (Parekh, 2011). Even though the company was attempting to be clever, which is part of its overall brand-image, the organization was surprised by the vast negative reaction on a global scale. Issues such as this, and others which are highlighted in Chapter 2, have prompted communication professionals to warn brand managers about the "Seven Stages of Committing a Social Media Sin" – stages that include gaffe, outrage, and apology (Parekh, 2011).

Of course, it should be noted that, beyond collective action, some organizations have embraced and are using social media effectively for other purposes. For instance, when global journalists covered the 2010 volcanic ash crisis in Europe (an issue beyond an organization's control), the European organization for Safety of Air Navigation (EUROCONTROL) utilized social media such as Facebook and Twitter as successful communication tools to keep journalists and the general public apprised (Evans, 2011). Such effective use of social media should serve as a guiding example of how to keep key publics informed, and how journalists are eager to share the organization's news with their respective online communities. As many communication experts have noted, when key publics (including the news media) feel that they are being kept informed, the issues are more quickly resolved and trust is maintained (Watson & Noble, 2008).

It seems certain that as communication technologies evolve and newer social media platforms emerge (e.g. Google+), these channels will continue to play a major role in issues management and crisis communications. In today's media environment there is a demand for transparency, authenticity, and responsiveness – and experts warn that organizations that do not deliver on these expectations will quickly see an issue escalate globally (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Timely response has been a key tenet in crisis communications (Nelson, 2011); but in a "real-time world" where customers will readily discuss an issue online, the organization must respond much more quickly, even if to simply acknowledge that it is aware of the problem and is looking into it (Ingram, 2011). However, if the organization fails to respond promptly, then some public relations experts recognize that the company could appear apathetic toward the situation, and its key publics may begin to question the organization's willingness to fix the problem (Nelson, 2011). As for transparency and authenticity, it is no secret that the public relations profession has faced many of its own credibility and ethics challenges, and the use of social media can potentially exacerbate these challenges. In fact, new rules associated with social media usage have already emerged (e.g. Federal Trade Commission guidelines regarding disclosure of product endorsements). Additionally, social media organizations such as Google and Facebook have been dealing with their own consumer privacy problems. And as the competition among the social media giants escalates, so too do the concerns surrounding this growing problem. For example Burson-Marsteller, one of the world's largest public relations firms, attempted to "out" Google's *Gmail Social Circle* feature by secretly pitching top-tier media outlets to run news stories and editorials about how the feature "ostensibly tramples the privacy of millions of Americans and violates federal fair trade rules" (Acohido & Swartz, 2011, para. 2). Instead, however, this public relations firm itself was revealed by *USA Today* as working on behalf of an "unnamed client" (many believe it was Facebook), leaving leaders in the public relations field to denounce yet another ethical breach within the profession (Elsasser, 2011).

The public relations profession is at a critical juncture. Some are already proclaiming, "PR is dead," and calling for newly conceived "connected communications" practitioners (Forbes, 2011). Others have proclaimed that practitioners who are not "onboard"—i.e., using social media today—will soon be left behind and out of work (Battenberg, 2009; Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). With today's complexity of social media and globalization, and in a time when crises are escalated by a digitally powered news cycle and engaged publics, the public relations practice has never been more vital to an organization. Therefore, public relations must demonstrate that it is uniquely positioned and prepared to manage social media activity on behalf of an organization (Battenberg, 2009; Ledder, 2009; Solis & Breakenride, 2009). Yet the aforementioned Burson-Marstellar study (2011) indicated that many companies lacked experience and institutional knowledge of how to engage online in real time (p.31). Unfortunately, this includes seasoned public relations practitioners, many of who did not grow up using online technology and have not sufficiently prepared to lead an organization through this newer communication activity (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009; Paine, 2010). Traditionally, organizations would turn to their public relations partners to guide them through this ever-changing environment; but when these partners do not demonstrate the talent or confidence in handling such issues, organizations are forced to find this talent elsewhere – either in other internal departments or through the many emerging vendors that are quite eager to serve in this capacity. In fact, a recent survey (Daniels, 2010) indicated that when companies look to hire an external partner to assist with emerging media, most consider direct marketing agencies, ad agencies, and digital agencies first. Only 16% indicated that they would look for assistance from their public relations firm.

The profession's overall slow movement on new and emerging media has enabled organizational counterparts in information technology (IT) or marketing to exert their own power and expertise. On a positive note, according to the 2010 Wright & Hinson survey, more organizations have placed social media management under the public relations functions: "81% said that's where it belonged in 2010, compared to just 66% in the year before" (Paine, 2010, para. 9). Now public relations professionals must demonstrate vast expertise in new media usage, which includes the complexity of communicating with global audiences. Sriramesh and Vercic (2009) have cautioned that it is not enough for public relations professionals to fully recognize the media 's power in shaping public opinion on a global scale; practitioners must now also "understand how the media operate in a variety of countries before developing strategies for conducting effective media relations" (p. 63). Yet most public relations practitioners are more comfortable operating regionally or within a controlled environment; they therefore tend to apply ethnocentric or standardized approaches across various socioeconomic, political, and cultural systems (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 113). Such ethnocentric practices can become especially problematic when applied in crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

It is the role of the public relations professional to change an organization's perception or misunderstanding about new media, and begin to engage and build proactive online communities. By effectively using social media and engaging key publics in two-way communication (see Chapter 2), public relations professionals can continue to steer an organization away from crises, especially "manufactured" crises (i.e. smaller issues that get escalated because the organization poorly handled or failed to resolve the issue in a timely manner). But in order for the public relations profession to be viewed as an essential and strategic component of any organization, its practitioners need to accelerate their own understanding and comfort level with emerging media.

Unfortunately, to date, many of the current scholarly theories regarding crisis management or the practice of international public relations do not yet explicitly discuss the impact of social media's usage by global publics. Further, global crisis communications and social media usage are two relatively new subject areas with limited empirical research. Even the leading trade publication for the public relations industry, *PRWeek*, only recently issued its second annual social media usage survey (2011). Meantime, many organizations continue to falter in their handling of online communications, and have allowed external voices to take command over their single greatest commodity – their brand. It is not surprising that as communication experts continue to review various organizational crisis cases, they have noted the gap between crisis theories and actual public relations practice and have called for additional research on this topic (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009).

This thesis explores current empirical and theoretical research on organizational crisis management, and examines how the rise of new and social media in global communication practices has affected great change in the speed and reach of crisis issues. Following Chapter 2's literature review and Chapter 3's methodological exposition, the thesis presents and discusses recent crisis events of two well-known global brands (in Chapters 4 and 5, respectively) during which social media were used to either manage or incite the crisis. Accordingly, this thesis explores how these organizations: (a) applied crisis response strategies prescribed by highly cited theoretical frameworks; (b) utilized social media as communication tools; and (c) managed the issue on a global scale. The sixth (final) chapter offers a comparative analysis of the two cases and explores the congruence between research-based crisis communication theories and public relations practice. As well, it reviews recommended best practices for using social media to implement a global crisis communication strategy and considers implications for public relations practitioners working in a digital and global world.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A crisis as defined by Coombs (2007) is "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat" (p. 164). All organizations are at risk of encountering crises; but how an organization effectively plans for crises and manages its crisis communication have helped to solidify and advance the public relations field. The area of "issues management" emerged in the 1970s, and many experts regard risk and crisis communication as the core of public relations theory and practice (J. Grunig, Dozier, Ehling, L. Grunig, Repper and White, 1992; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). But the complexities of globalization and emerging technologies have further advanced the need for expert public relations practice. As information and communication technologies (ICT's) expand and as multicultural audiences converse and express opinions through social networks, the Internet now serves as a facilitator and even a "trigger" of global business crises (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). In fact, for the last several years many activists have used online communication channels to foster their campaigns against corporations (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). Traditionally, as protectors and defenders of an organization's reputation and brand, the organization's senior management and its public relations practitioners were expected to anticipate potential crisis scenarios and develop well-planned crisis communication strategies. However, anticipating issues from the confines of the corporate office is no longer sufficient. Organizations need to actively engage with their stakeholders or "key publics" in order to better understand the perceptions held by these key publics, who are now global and virtually linked through emerging communication technologies.

Core Crisis Communications Theories

"Every organization, simply by existing, has relationships with publics and therefore has public relations" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 215). Public relations practitioners have used environmental scanning as a method for monitoring key stakeholders' (publics') actions and opinions in order to identify areas of concern, and to develop ways for the organization to diffuse a particular emerging issue (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 141). However, when a crisis occurs, key publics generally learn about the event from the news media or, in today's world, from online media. Both the news media and Internet discussion will establish a crisis frame that limits or defines the issue (Coombs, 2007). Therefore, public relations become essential and can demonstrate its main value when managing crisis situations (Larsson & Nohrstedt, 2002; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006).

As issues management took center stage in public relations, several crisis theories emerged and, to date, these theories have provided the basis for the majority of crisis communication research (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). From Benoit's Image Repair Discourse Theory (1997) to Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2006), these research-based frameworks have helped to provide crisis managers, particularly those in the Unites States, with guidelines for how to best manage and design communication messages during a crisis (Benoit, 1997). Each of these crisis theories recognizes the importance of the media and how the media will frame the crisis if the organization does not do its part to manage the communication process. For the purpose of this paper, the following sections provide overviews of three core crisis management theories, which have been the basis for significant crisis research over the past two decades.

Benoit's Image Repair Discourse Theory (1997). Benoit's theory, based on previous studies of apologia ("the speech of self-defense," Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 273), addresses how organizational messages should be structured in order to respond, limit damage, and improve a corporation's image in a crisis situation. According to Benoit, "the key question is not if the act was *in fact* offensive, but whether the act is *believed* by the relevant audience(s) to be heinous" (p. 178). Image repair discourse (also known as image restoration) focuses on the types of messages that can be constructed and delivered in a crisis, rather than the various types of crisis situations (Benoit, 1997). The five major strategies of image repair include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification ("confess and beg forgiveness," Benoit, p. 181). Within each major strategy, Benoit offered various versions for response. For instance, he described six versions or approaches that a company could use to reduce the perceived offensiveness of an action. These approaches range from minimizing negative feelings to actual compensation for the perceived wrongful act. Benoit noted that image restoration rhetoric is a form of persuasive discourse and that the powers of persuasion are limited (pp. 183-185).

Some critics of this theory have argued that Benoit's theory "may be clouded by the false impression that the target is a discrete, completely-formed subject" (Burns and Bruner, 2000, p. 31). These critics have called for a more audience-oriented perspective. But Benoit has countered that the audience holds an important place in this theory and in his research (Benoit, 2000). He argued that by prioritizing audiences (ensuring that the most important audience is appeased first) and by using different, but not conflicting, messages for different audiences, a company can favorably influence multiple audiences and keep its reputation intact.

Grunig's Excellence in Public Relations Theory (1992). Grunig et al. (1992) offered a theory on excellence in public relations in order to illustrate how public relations practitioners can best contribute to an organization's success. As part of this theory, Grunig and his colleagues argued that an excellent public relations department would strategically handle the issues management function by building relationships with key publics who can either constrain or enhance the effectiveness of an organization. By building relationships and engaging in "two-way symmetrical communication" where "*both* the organization and the public must be willing to accommodate the interests of the other" (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002, p. 315), a public relations practitioner can take an active leadership role to anticipate and resolve most issues with key publics before they become crises.

However, if an issue escalates to a crisis level, Grunig argued that by following four strategic principles (including ongoing, two-way symmetrical communication) an organization can effectively manage a crisis situation (Watson & Noble, 2008). Grunig's other core crisis communication principles are: (a) The *Relationship Principle* – the belief that "an organization can withstand crises if it has well-established relationships with key stakeholders" (Watson & Noble, 2008, p. 193); (b) The *Accountability Principle* – the concept of accepting responsibility even if you are not at fault; and (c) The *Disclosure Principle* – the commitment from the organization to fully disclose, once available, all that it knows about a crisis or problem. According to Grunig, key publics need to know that the organization perceived to be at fault is attempting to do "the right thing." If the public senses that the organization is accepting responsibility, then these key publics are less likely to take an issue to the media and more likely to remain supportive of the organization (Watson & Noble, 2008).

Grunig's excellence in public relations theory and its focus on two-way symmetrical communication extend well beyond the management of crisis issues. Since this theory is frequently cited by communication scholars and academics, it has also invited its share of criticism. Critics have argued that even when two-way communication results in a change of behavior or policy, this change or concession still likely leans in favor of one party's best interests. For instance, Roper (2005) argued that it should be further examined if concessions made by the organization are "just enough" to quiet public criticism or to help prevent the introduction of unwelcome legislation. From an issues management perspective, businesses certainly prefer voluntary self-regulation rather than legislated regulation (p. 83). Therefore, the change in behavior, even during a crisis, may very well be self-serving.

Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2007). Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) draws upon Benoit's Image Restoration Theory and Weiner's Attribution Theory (1985) whereby "a person attributes responsibility for an event" and will experience an emotional reaction such as anger or sympathy (Coombs, 2007, p. 165). For Coombs, the crisis situation and the organization's reputation are the focal points of his empirically tested theory. He posited that specific types of crisis situations generate predictable levels of crisis responsibility – attributions of the organization's responsibility for the crisis (p. 168) – and are better resolved if organizations implement specific crisis response strategies that are aligned with the nature of the crisis situation (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2009). "The idea is to match the level of responsibility and aid to victims in the crisis response strategy that would be warranted by the crisis responsibility and reputational damage generated by the crisis situation" (Coombs, 2006, p. 241). According to Coombs (2007), media coverage is a critical component of the organization's reputation management since most stakeholders learn about a crisis from traditional news media or via the Internet. If the crisis results in a change in stakeholder opinion from favorable to unfavorable, this outcome can change how these stakeholders will interact with the organization (p. 164). However, he argued that if the organization's pre-crisis reputation is favorable, it will have more reputational capital to spend and the organization ultimately "suffers less and rebounds more quickly" (p. 165).

When developing the SCCT, Coombs noted his prior research (Coombs, 2004) on reputational threat, which found that the stakeholders' attribution of the organization's degree of responsibility for the crisis correlates to the stakeholders' reaction. Therefore, the more the organization is perceived to be at fault, the greater the reputational threat. In order to assess the level of reputational threat presented by crisis type, he framed three crisis clusters (Coombs, 2007. pp. 167-168):

- The Victim Cluster – very weak attributions of crisis responsibility (i.e. natural disasters, rumors, or product tampering by an external agent); the organization is viewed as a victim of the event;

- The Accidental Cluster – minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (i.e. technical error or equipment failure); the event is considered unintentional; and
- The Intentional/Preventable Cluster – very strong attributions of crisis responsibility (including human errors) where the organization "knowingly placed people at risk, took inappropriate actions or violated a law/regulation" (p. 168).

Coombs cautioned that the organization's history of crises and/or an unfavorable prior relationship reputation may alter the initial reputational threat. For instance, if the organization has had a series of equipment failures, the reaction from stakeholders will likely move from minimal attributions of crisis responsibility to very strong attributions of crisis responsibility (p. 169).

Once the crisis manager assesses the perceived acceptance of responsibility for a crisis, SCCT further provides a list of response strategies along with guidelines for using a specific strategy. Coombs (2006) noted that the "words used and the actions taken by management affect how people perceive the organization and/or the crisis" (p. 171). In order to protect the organization's reputation, Coombs' crisis response strategies serve to shape attribution of the crisis and reduce its negative effect. He classified these strategies into four areas – inform, deny, diminish (lessen the perceived severity by reframing the crisis situation), and rebuild. Although certain constraints (i.e. financial resources) could impact the strategy selected, and previous crisis history plays an important role, SCCT generally recommends inform or deny strategies should be used in the victim cluster, diminish in low or minimal attributions of crisis responsibility (i.e. accidental cluster), and apology/rebuild strategies in the intentional cluster (Coombs 2006; 2007). Still, he cautioned that the use of rebuild strategies where the crisis manager says or takes positive steps to offset the crisis to improve the organization's image, is not always the best or appropriate response. It is more important to maintain consistency and avoid mixing certain response strategies that can erode the effectiveness of the organization's response (2007. p. 173). Coombs recognized that public relations play a critical role in an organization's crisis response by helping to develop the messages that are sent to key publics (Coombs, 2007, October 30). But the role also includes the need to quickly assess reaction from news media, for if the media (traditional and online) accepts the crisis frame, the organization's reputation is typically spared (Coombs 2007, p. 171). If the media does not accept the crisis frame, and operate under a different media frame for the crisis, then the crisis manager will also need to operate within that media frame (2007, p. 173).

> In most cases, the news media is the final arbitrator of crisis frames. The frames used in the news media reports are the frames that most stakeholders will experience and adopt. That is why it is critical that crisis manager present 'their side of the story' to the news media. One exception would be crises that transpire predominantly online. For online crises, people posting crisis-related information to the Internet provide the frames. The people who post to the Internet about crises include the crisis managers, influential bloggers, critics of the organization and crisis victims. (Coombs, 2007, p. 171)

It should be noted that in an examination of crisis communication research trends, Coombs' SCCT was the most frequently cited or applied to other scholarly research (An

& Cheng, 2012, p. 76). This theoretical framework will be further discussed later in this chapter and will be reviewed in the case study research presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

Organizational Management of Crisis Events

Crisis theories can inform practice; but as the world navigates through greater economic, political, and environmental challenges, it has become increasingly necessary to have effective and competent crisis leaders who can instill public trust. Research has shown that the general public's perceptions of a given company's chief executive officer (CEO) or other senior executive spokespersons often align with perceptions of how the organization is handling the issue at hand. For example, Hwang and Cameron (2008) argued that the public expectations about an organization's stance in crisis communication is based on perceived leadership and perceived severity of threats. They conducted a study using four fictitious corporate news stories to evaluate perceived leadership styles (transformational, transactional, democratic, and autocratic) and severity of threat (strong versus weak), and found that, based upon these different leadership styles, the public will come to expect a particular stance taken by the leader in a crisis. For instance, many members of the United States Congress took an autocratic stance during the 2011 debt ceiling discussions; however, based upon public expectations that Congressional leaders will compromise as well as decades of past debt ceiling negotiations, most citizens had expected leaders to take a more democratic leadership style. Hwang and Cameron noted that if the leader's actual response and the public's expected response (based upon perception of style) are conflicting, then additional issues may result. They recommended that if the organization is planning to take an advocative stance during a crisis yet the public strongly expects an accommodative stance (democratic leadership style), then the leader should "seriously consider movement of the stance toward a rather accommodative position to prevent any aggravated conflicts with the disappointed or angry publics" (p. 3). Since the general public receives most information about an organization's CEO through mass media news outlets, these researchers also recommended that periodic content analyses and reputation audits are needed in order to stay abreast of key publics' perceptions of the CEO.

Schoenberg (2005) also questioned if crisis management depends more on preparation or leadership. He commented, "While planning is important, leadership in a time of crisis, particularly in the immediate aftermath, may trump any preparation" (p. 1). Communication experts (Quirke, 2010; Schoenberg, 2005; Weiss, 2002) agree that excellent verbal and non-verbal communication skills are the foundation of being an effective crisis leader. In most cases, the crisis leader will become the internal and external spokesperson of the organization. Whether communicating with employees, customers, investors, or the press, the spokesperson must have strong communication skills in order to effectively build trust. Trust is of major importance in crisis communication (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006; Semple, 2009), and currently the public's trust is deteriorating for United States businesses, government, NGOs, and journalists (Edelman, 2011). According to the 2011 Edelman Trust Barometer, the firm's 11th annual trust and credibility survey, the top four most-trusted headquarter countries for global companies were Germany, Canada, Sweden and Switzerland; the United States, on the other hand, had fallen from fourth to tenth place in just three years. The news is better for CEOs, however, who ranked among the top credible spokespeople globally. With regard to crisis management, this annual survey indicated that in order for an organization to win back trust, "safeguarding customers and employees" was ranked by global respondents as the priority, with "open, honest and frequent communication from the CEO regarding repair efforts" as a close second.

Employees as company spokespersons. Although CEOs and other senior executives are vital communicators for the organization, so too are the organization's employees.

> Communicating timely and relevant information to employees – whether positive or negative – before the public receives it, is a basic tenet of strong organizational communication. Employees care deeply about their organization and have a sense of ownership of the brand. This feeling allows them to be involved, feel valued and be equipped to present our organization in the best light. (Lofgren & Hernandez, 2011, p. 11)

The rapid change in communication technologies provides internal communicators with a variety of digital tools. But if an organization does not permit or enable its own employees to utilize social media at work, or if the organization does not have an active Facebook page or a Twitter feed, how can the organization truly communicate effectively in an online, global environment? Burton (2011) noted, "Employee communicators are being more aggressive in pushing their leadership teams to see them as strategic consultants" (p. 14). Rather than creating a viable social media policy where engaged employees can become the organization's best brand advocates, however, many organizations are more concerned with lack of productivity. They therefore continue to prohibit use of any social media tools. In fact, *PRWeek* noted that only one in four companies encourage employees to use social media (Daniels, 2010).

Further, a leading human resources organization, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), reported in 2011 that 43% of all sized organizations blocked access to social media platforms from an organization-owned computer or handheld device. They also found that larger-staff-sized organizations (i.e., publicly owned for-profit organizations with multinational operations) were even more likely to track employee use of and block access to social media and other multi-media platforms (SHRM, 2011). More progressive organizations, however, recognized that "a brand is only as good as the people who deliver it" (Burton, 2011, p. 16) and invested more money and effort into their employee communication programs. Employees utilize YouTube, Facebook, and blogs for personal communications; and informed organizations recognize that employees are likely to publicly comment on their employer. At Kaiser Permanente, the integrated managed care consortium with 182,000 employees and physicians, the organization appreciated its employees as its most valuable resource and welcomed employees' comments on its Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube accounts ((Lofgren & Hernandez, 2011, p. 12). Other organizations have accepted that younger employees are often more advanced in digital technology usage, and assist their older co-workers on how to set up Facebook pages or Twitter accounts (Burton, 2011). One outcome of these new workforce dynamics includes realignments within the organizational structure. The *2011 PRWeek/Hill & Knowlton Corporate Survey* noted a trend whereby corporate communications departments were being flattened and centralized (Gordon, 2011). For instance, Southwest Airlines had recently merged three separate communication units – employee communications, public relations, and emerging media – into one: communications and strategic outreach (Gordon, 2011, p.

33). It has been argued that such consolidation helps to improve public relations practioners' ability to respond to fast-paced information flows within and across an array of social media, while also enabling the release of more consistent corporate messages (p. 34).

As organizations prepare updated crisis communication plans, these plans must address external stakeholders such as consumers and the media; but the plans must also consider internal stakeholders from every level of the organization, who are now active communicators of an organization's brand. Additionally, when a given organization's communication practitioners are not aware of an online conversation about the organization's brand, there could be global implications for that brand regardless of whether the organization is domestic, international, or multinational. This is because "global reach" now extends to anyone with access to the Internet. To that end, it should come as no surprise that "global communications" hiring is increasing as "Employers must look at every issue from a global perspective, not just from the viewpoint of the home office" (Burton, 2011, p. 16).

Global Management of Crisis Issues

"International public relations" has been defined as the practice of public relations across international boundaries and cultures (Curtin & Gaither, 2007). Although still in its infancy, international public relations is considered a top growth area for the profession, with the concept of culture—"the process by which meaning is produced, circulated, consumed, commodified, and endlessly reproduced and renegotiated in society"—at its center (Williams, 1961, 1981; Hall, 1980 as noted in Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 35).

The practice of international public relations is an outcome of the globalization of business (Ihator, 2000). With companies having a presence in multiple countries (physically and/or virtually), it is now necessary for practitioners to "identify, study and understand world views, mindsets, and habits of their global publics in order to effectively communicate (Ihator, p. 38). Practitioners must understand that differing cultural beliefs can have a profound effect on one's perception of a public relations campaign; and *public relations* in one country might be viewed as *propaganda* or *information* in another country (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 7). Scholarly research suggests that propaganda and public relations are directly related (Curtin & Gaither, p. 55). For example, *communications* in the Soviet Era was viewed as propaganda – a mix between persuasion and coercion (p. 54). This is important because "Public relations has the power to create a particular type of reality; and that power comes with tremendous ethical responsibilities" (p. 79). To that end, practitioners must also understand the news media's role and function within a specific culture, as this will vary and it would be a mistake to assume that a Western approach (Barber, 1992) to media management will work in every region or country (Ihator, 2000 and Freitag, 2002).

With globalization, organizational communication and crisis management have become increasingly complex. First, corporations carry perceptions of their national identity, which is different than the organization's corporate identity or brand. For instance, "The identification of Coke with United States has spread around the world … embodying the American dream: opportunity and consumerism (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 49). Curtin and Gaither (2007) noted that national identities develop through the concept of internationalism, through relationships of one of "us" among many of "them"

(p. 175). They added that if a communication campaign fails to establish a common identity or meaning around an issue and its target audience, then conflicting identities will arise (p. 46). Companies such as McDonald's, Coke, and Nestlé are prime examples of organizations whose national identities have been linked to social or political issues in other countries.

Next, the degree of activism—"the variety of issues available for activists to seize upon in a given society"—varies across countries (Kim & Sriramesh, 2009, p.83). Sriramesh and Vercic identified activism as one of main variables of critical importance to international public relations practice. They noted that societies have varying degrees of media access; therefore, understanding the extent to which media utilities are accessible to a particular society's activist groups helps the international public relations practitioner to gauge the amount of potential opposition (p. 74). For example, the United States has more diverse and widely reported issues than a country such as China; but Sriramesh and Vercic argued that this is the result of an "open mass communication system" versus a "directed mass communication system," where many messages are withheld from an audience (p. 88). Accordingly, the more a society enables open message-and-receiver systems, the more likely it is to foster higher levels of activism. Freitag (2002) noted, "This is a 24-hr, interconnected world. Time zones and national borders are no longer significant barriers to information flow" (p. 208). To that end, emerging communication technologies such as social media can either exacerbate or help to alleviate potential conflicts.

International public relations models. Curtin & Gaither (2007) noted that, because organizations already exist and are generating messages, they must recognize that they can never begin any international public relations efforts from a truly neutral starting point (p. 33). As noted, it is essential for public relations practitioners to recognize how "public relations" is viewed culturally in one country versus another, and equally important to understand the varying regulatory environments (Curtin and Gaither's, p. 226). Freitag (2002) argued that, in order to be successful in international public relations assignments, public relations professionals need to have an appreciation for and understanding of cultural differences (p. 210).

Over the years, several models or perspectives have guided the practice of international public relations. These include:

- Ethnocentric perspective – Proponents of this approach believe that public relations is built around core principles that are unaffected by cultural factors. Therefore, it should be practiced the same everywhere (Kinzar & Bohn, 1985);
- Polycentric/culturally relative perspective – Proponents of this approach argue that public relations should be practiced differently in every culture (Kinzar & Bohn, 1985);
- Hybrid approach – Merges the ethnocentric and polycentric approaches noting that some general public relations principles are appropriate for all cultures/societies (Vercic, L. Grunig, & J. Grunig, 1993); and
- Personal Influence – Public relations aims at establishing a personal relationship between key representatives of the corporation and key persons in the media, government, politics, and activist groups (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995).

The personal influence model is used by many countries, corporations, and government entities including Washington D.C. (Grunig, Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995). From research conducted in India, Greece and Taiwan, Grunig, et al. (1995) found this particular model (closely aligned to Grunig's *press agentry* model) to be a common public relations practice. In fact they found that in India and Greece, "organizations tried to hire public relations practitioners who were among the elite of society so that they had contact with powerful people and possessed necessary graces (p. 180). However, in testing the other three most commonly used North America models, including two-way symmetrical communication (the "excellence model" in public relations practice), the researchers concluded, "the two-way symmetrical model seems to be more of an ideal, normative model than it is in the United States" (p. 182).

More recently, Curtin and Gaither (2007) have argued for an alternative approach, which considers the role of relational power within an organization (p. 209). In their view, "Public relations is a cultural bridge that must change and cannot ignore economics, politics, or social issues on any level" (p. 24). When developing their own model, they noted several points and key concepts. First, they discussed the "circuit of culture," which has no beginning or end. In this circuit, there are five moments in an ongoing process (regulation, production, consumption, representation, and identity) that work together to provide a shared cultural space in which "meaning is created, shaped, modified, and recreated" (p. 38). Additionally, they argued, an organization's identity varies by context. Therefore each interaction it has with internal or external stakeholders will contribute to its multiple identities. Finally, they noted that a given organization's identity is less contested by publics if it is consistent with the organization's actions (p. 172). This is an especially important concept for managing a crisis.

Cultural-Economic Model. Based on the circuit of culture and the premise that public relations are predicated on communicative relationships, Curtin and Gaither's (2007) alternative model addressed a long-term perspective, and in their opinion, offered a "new way of thinking" about the practice of international public relations (p. 206). The following are key points from the Cultural-Economic model:

- Culture, defined as "the process and space in which meanings are constituted and competing discourses emerge," is the center of the public relations practice (p. 206);
- By understanding the extent to which the organization's identity is already established in a region or country, this model serves to guide public relations practitioners on how to either build on that identity or create a new one (p 231); and
- Public relations professionals are *cultural intermediaries* – mediators between producers and consumers who actively create meanings (p. 210). This does not equate to becoming language translators. Also, the public relations practice is regarded as a process, and its practitioners should expect and be open to change.

Curtin and Gaither (2007) acknowledged that changing behavior does not happen quickly and noted, "in a digital world, the roles of producers and consumers collide" (p. 146). Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) have helped to create new communicative environments independent of time and space (Castells, 1996). These ever-growing virtual communities have presented opportunities and challenges for many global organizations as ICTs have become the main medium for activist groups, enabling them to become powerful and attract the organization's attention (Falkeimer & Heide, 2009). As the balance of power shifts from the corporate office to the home of average citizen, and as online media producers—including bloggers and amateur journalists—become trusted news sources, communication flow is no longer "one-way," and national boundaries are increasingly dissolved. Today, when an organization has a specific public relations challenge in one region, how the organization responds to that regional issue can also affect its business or reputation in other parts of the world. This, known as "cross-national conflict shifting" (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 23), helps to highlight how new media are "altering the terrain for global public relations practice" (Sriramesh & Vercic, 2009, p. 75). The emergence of these new media utilities and their varied uses during crisis management will now be reviewed.

Emergence of Social Media

According to Wright and Hinson (2009), "social media deliver web-based information created by people with the intention of facilitating communication. These social media now represent one of the world's major sources of social interaction as people share stories and experiences with each other" (p. 10). Social media include text, images, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts, search engine marketing, video sharing, Wikis, social and professional networks, and micro-blogging sites (Wright & Hinson, 2009). Some of the most common social networks include Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

Wright and Hinson's annual research on public relations practitioners' uses of social media continues to demonstrate that social media have had a huge impact on the practice. Solis and Breakenridge (2009) have further argued that the advent of social media has resulted in the "reinvention of public relations" (page 1). They view social media as rooted in conversations, relationships, shared ideas, and common interests, which offer opportunities to engage directly with customers and peers who either purchase or influence the decisions of others. With social media, there is empowerment for a new class of authoritative voices – influencers – who cannot be ignored (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). These new influencers are "regular people with expertise, opinions, and the drive and passion to share those opinions" (p. 1).

Up until a few years ago, most organizations utilized traditional media outlets (e.g. broadcast and print) to reach key publics. Grunig et al. (1992) referred to this one-way communication (sending, but not receiving) as the press-agentry model, which generally strives for favorable publicity. As previously noted, Grunig's "excellence theory" requires the implementation of two-way symmetrical communication systems that help to build or strengthen relationships, reduce conflict, and support cooperation between an organization and its key internal and external publics. In two-way symmetrical communication, "the public should be just as likely to persuade the organization's management to change attitudes or behaviors as the organization is likely to change the publics' attitudes or behavior" (Dozier & Ehling, 1992, p. 177).

A survey of Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) members indicated that public relations professionals recognized that with the advent of social media there has been a dramatic increase in two-way communication (Booz Allen Hamilton & PRSA, 2009). Solis and Breakenridge (2009) have advised practitioners to listen and become engaged in the communities that affect a company's relationships or authority.

Additionally, they recommended that practitioners study online societies' cultures in order to observe how these societies interact with one another. "You probably didn't realize that part of your job is to become a Social Media sociologist and participant observer" (p. 164). From their perspective, by observing first, practitioners can effectively use social media to build meaningful relationships that contribute to the company's brand equity and, ultimately, the company's bottom-line.

As noted in Chapter 1, new media continue to change the communication landscape. The Web is no longer a place that merely distributes content by recognized authorities such as companies, newspapers, and publishers (Teich, 2009.) The Web is saturated with user-generated content; and it is common for bloggers, friends, or followers to review or respond to individual products and customer experiences (Teich, 2009). In fact, it has become commonplace for consumers to post videos on YouTube openly supporting, denouncing, or defiling an organization's brand. Additionally, consumer-generated media also challenge the traditional roles of journalists, enabling global audiences to become active participants in the news process (Feng and Li, 2009). This presents both opportunities and challenges for organizations and the public relations professionals who represent them. Yet as an industry, public relations is not leading, nor fully demonstrating, a level of comfort with these new communication tools. In one *PRWeek* survey (Gordon, 2011), 89% of respondents acknowledged feeling increased pressure to act as the "guardian" of their company's reputation, yet only 27% indicated that they are responsible for spearheading their company's social media vision. In an earlier *PRWeek survey* (Daniels, 2010), nearly 30% of respondents (members of U.S. and international companies) indicated that they still do not include any social media tools as part of their marketing efforts; and of those who do use social media, almost 70% have not made changes to a company's products/services or marketing campaigns based upon customer feedback gleaned from social media. Finally, while the latter survey found that primary business uses for social media included creating communities (26%), an equal number of respondents (25%) said that these tools are used to better understand the competitive landscape. Perhaps most disconcerting is that a mere 14% indicated that they used social media to monitor conversations by key publics; meanwhile, crisis management did not even make the "top ten" list.

Unlike their business counterparts, nonprofit organizations seem to be engaging in more effective social media usage. Many nonprofit organizations place advocacy as central to their mission (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 30), and social media provide a quick, cost-effective way for these organizations to reach a broad, global audience. Research conducted by Greenberg and MacAulay (2009) indicated that nonprofits are "increasingly using social technologies to build networks of collaborators … and to foster a new era of creativity and symmetrical communication between message senders and receivers" (p. 73). Nonprofit organizations have also been credited for valuing the importance of disclosure, or transparency, in their social network profiles in order to garner public trust.

To that end, communication professionals agree that transparency is essential in social media and that digital communication tools should not be used merely as a vehicle for repurposing marketing content and messages (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009). Transparency is especially critical in crisis communication as brand reputations and consumer relationships can be negatively impacted by a crisis issue. As Coombs (2006) noted, "…reputation is a resource worthy of protection and a legitimate concern during a crisis" (p. 246). Generally, the need to control the message has been the priority for many organizations, especially during a crisis event. Experts now argue, though, that perception management should be the primary focus of most communications initiatives as brand comments can be easily discovered online (Solis & Breakenridge, 2009).

Social media usage for crisis management. The use of social media can typically satisfy three concerns for effective crisis management: timeliness of information, transparency, and the ability to readily reach both internal and external stakeholders regionally and globally. As blogs were among the first broadly used social media tools, Sweetser and Metzgar (2007) investigated the impact of blogs on relationship management during a crisis. Their research findings suggested that launching a blog in response to a crisis may be an effective crisis management tool. The researchers commented that just the sense that the organization is trying to effectively communicate by providing timely and accurate information during the crisis (as advocated by Grunig, 1992) may lead to a more positive overall impression of the organization, and, as a result, the public's negative perception of the crisis decreases. Sriramesh and Vercic (2009) concurred with this school of thought, further noting that through continued monitoring of the blogosphere, "organizations must engage bloggers through open communication" and particularly engage activists in "real time" before a crisis can escalate even further (p. 63).

As a cautionary tale however, some practitioners' use of blogs or other social media have become the direct cause for an organizational crisis. Burns (2008) cited several high-profile companies (i.e. McDonalds, Wal-Mart, and Sony) that incorporated fake blogs into their communication campaigns. Once these fake blogs were exposed, the respective public relations firms had to contend with controversy in the blogosphere. In the Wal-Mart case of 2006, the ethical issue was the public relations firm's lack of transparency about its involvement in an online campaign of two freelance writers who traveled across America, parked their RV at various Wal-Mart parking lots, and interviewed a host of Wal-Mart employees. The trip was legitimate, but ultimately the president and CEO of Wal-Mart's public relations agency was forced to acknowledge his company's participation in this RV adventure. In its failure to be transparent, the public relations agency accepted full responsibility, and its CEO subsequently targeted the online community through his own blog. However, Burns noted that one big misstep on this CEO's part – as was noted by some comments posted on his blog – was that he failed to respond to the matter in a timely fashion. In the end, the CEO's apology was not believed by some, and appeared to be merely an effort by him for damage control.

Providing timely information is also critical during a crisis. An organization's prompt response often minimizes any damage to the company's overall reputation. Social networks provide readily available forum for organizations to distribute up-to-date information from product recalls to evacuation procedures. But the speed at which the world now communicates means an organization can also be quickly blindsided by changing attitudes (Schwartz & Gibb, 1999). Additionally, as information technology continues to connect various global cultures, the ideas and opinions expressed via one communication network may reach worldwide audiences in mere seconds (Curtin & Gaither, 2007).

> Dissolving boundaries, space, language, time and traditional modes of communication, the Web has linked people and information together more rapidly

than ever before. This global regression toward mutual interests in cyberspace has created new communities that revolve around issues and topics. In cyberspace, cultures are temporarily reified by the innumerable worldviews that are present and thriving on the Web. Any Web site is global because its audience is global. (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 58)

As organizations adopt social media to reach internal and external stakeholders, for proactive outreach or to communicate during a crisis, it is important to note that, although technology is more widespread, it is not equally distributed within the United States or across the world. For instance, less than 1% of South Asia's population is online, even though it represents one fifth of the world's population (Curtin & Gaither, 2007, p. 58). Furthermore, 60% of European business leaders have indicated that social networking has changed the way people conduct business, yet only 45% are confident that they are keeping up with technological change in their industries – a 15% drop in confidence year over year (Beaubien, 2011, p. 4). This adds another level of complexity for today's public relations practitioners, as there is an increased need to build relationships and communicate readily with local and global publics ("groups who share similar values, norms and consciousness as world citizens," Lee, 2005, p. 15).

When considering global publics, some experts have argued that today's multicultural context challenges traditional mass communication strategies and messages (Falkheimer & Heide, 2009, p. 64). This is a valid point, but it does not imply that all traditional strategies should be abandoned. Rather, communication strategies need to be adjusted noting how traditional media (print and broadcast) and social media are now feeding off of one another. For instance, in 2009 a TwitPic became the first official news coverage of an airplane landing in the Hudson River. But a recent study (Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2010) found that in crisis situations, publics discussed what they read in newspaper articles more than the blogs or tweets that they received. Still, since this study found that Twitter users were more likely to *share* a message, the researchers concluded that organizations looking to ensure successful crisis communication would be wise to address Twitter followers.

Examples of new media usage in global crises. Crises often result from poor communication between an organization and its key publics; and technology and globalization have only served to intensify and accelerate the process of public scrutiny (Curtin & Gaither, 2007; Falkheimer & Heide, 2009). Certainly there are organizations, such as the aforementioned EUROCONTROL and Kaiser Permanente, which are attempting to utilize social media effectively. Other successful examples include international organizations helping to generate online donations for earthquakes, hurricanes, or other natural disasters. Yet even in these charitable cases, some experts (Ryan, 2011) have cautioned organizations that there is a fine line between philanthropy and promoting a personal agenda. For instance, Microsoft had to issue an apology following accusations that it was using the 2011 Japan earthquake disaster as a means to promote its Bing search engine (Ryan, 2011). Ryan noted, "While social media is a viable platform for corporations to help during times of crises, care must be taken to ensure the intentions will not be mistaken for profit" (para. 7).

In reviewing several recent crisis issues that were incited by or managed through social media, many traditional crisis communications best practices were applied. These include communicating to employees during the crisis event, establishing ways for customers to receive pertinent information, and understanding that print and broadcast media are critical resources during a crisis. Yet in one organizational case after another, the reputation and global operations of several stalwart brands have been threatened as unfavorable messages quickly spread through social media and, in turn, received mass media attention. Social media played a key role in following prominent crisis cases during the 2009 and 2010 timeframe.

Domino's Pizza. In one of the first highly publicized "social media crises," a Domino's Pizza employee posted a YouTube video (April, 2009) featuring the preparation of a customer's pizza in an unsanitary manner. Within two days, the video was viewed more than one million times and, to the organization's chagrin, became the top search results for "Domino's" (Hoskins 2010). Domino's reacted to this issue by first firing the employees in the video. It then strategically opened its own Twitter account, and posted a YouTube video with a message from its chief executive officer. Despite their quick and decisive response, it can still be argued that its 50-year brand was forever tainted (Hoskins, 2010).

Toyota. In 2010, Toyota was forced to recall millions of vehicles due to reported accelerator problems. Although the organization's response time was considered late by today's standards, the company has been credited with effectively utilizing social media tools to respond to the crisis (Hoskins, 2010). More specifically, the company opened a Twitter account and used Digg.com to enable the company's chief operating officer to take questions and address public concerns. "This was a powerful exercise that demonstrated Toyota's willingness to be authentic and address consumer comments and concerns head on" (Hoskins, 2010, p. 2). From Benoit's (1997) perspective, it can be argued that Toyota identified relevant audiences and then successfully applied two strategies – "reducing offensiveness" by attempting to minimize negative feelings associated with the perceived wrongful act; and "taking corrective action," which was first addressed with the massive vehicle recall. Although the brand was tarnished in social and broadcast media, many Toyota customers have remained loyal and, in 2010, the company led global vehicle sales for the third consecutive year (Tabuchi, 2011).

BP/Beyond Petroleum. Global oil giant BP, an organization now synonymous with "oil spill disaster," is already a historic case of poor crisis management. Initially, the organization did not appear to appreciate the power of social media. When the Gulf of Mexico oil spill occurred in late April 2010, a fake Twitter account emerged - @BPGlobalPR – garnering 137,000 followers by early June as compared to the actual global BP account which had 12,000 followers (Breed, 2010). The fake account's postings were sarcastic and designed to make fun of BP and its chief executive officer (whose integrity and authenticity were being questioned aggressively by broadcast journalists worldwide). Despite this Twitter account's surge in popularity, BP's non-response was surprising to many communication experts (Breed, 2010). But the company had already made many other public relations gaffes (Daniels, 2011). According to one crisis expert, Michael Gordon, BP's initial response—"a combination of a lack of transparency, a lack of straight taking and a lack of sensitivity to the victims" (Bergin, 2010)—was a perfect example of bad practice. Further, Reuters noted that BP, an international company based in the United Kingdom, lacked knowledge and experience pertaining to how this crisis would be perceived in the United States (Bergin, 2010). As a result, BP's brand reputation was damaged and its independently owned gas stations in the United States, experiencing the financial impact at the pumps, began to push for a brand name change (Corkery, 2010). One year later, however, this particular crisis is being held up as a "fundamental landmark moment" whereby digital communications came to the forefront as a crisis response tool (Daniels, 2011, p. 43). Indeed, two months after the crisis occurred, BP hired a new global public relations firm to help with its social media efforts (Daniels, 2011). It then launched its own Facebook and Twitter accounts in order to document the steps it was taking to clean up the spill, and by mid-August 2010 had 40,000 Facebook "fans" and 8,500 Twitter followers (Daniels, 2011). Although several BP staff members were dedicated to responding to social media inquiries (Daniels, 2011), it still remains to be seen if BP's new communication plan strives to follow Grunig's "excellence" model (1992) and utilize social media to build relationships through two-way symmetrical communication, where the public's interest is considered equal in importance to the organization's interest.

Social media crises incited by consumers. The BP case may ultimately serve as a landmark crisis case, but throughout the following year there were still many organizations "surprised" by the power of digital communication. Interestingly, some of the most recent issues are reminiscent of a popular line from a mid-1970s Academy Award winning movie, *Network:* "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" In an almost prophetic way, the movie's key character galvanized the nation with his fury and convinced his fellow Americans to get mad and shout this fiery sentiment from their windows. Thirty-five years later, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube now serve as the public's proverbial worldwide window, yet organizations are still learning lessons the hard way – that is, by experiencing an otherwise avoidable crisis.

Consumers, on the other hand, fully understand their newly found power. By organizing and expressing opinions via social networks, consumers know that within 24 hours they can have thousands of people following a discussion and expressing similar outrage for a company's action or decision. Netflix, Bank of America, and Verizon are three of the latest examples of American organizations experiencing nationwide backlash to a fairly common yet generally unpopular decision to increase fees. However, because of the power of social media, these announcements quickly escalated to a crisis-level, garnering both online and traditional media attention. Based upon the sheer volume of negative consumer feedback and, subsequently, vast negative media attention for their brands, each of these organizations ultimately succumbed to public pressure and reversed its initial management decision (Choi, 2012). In the Netflix case, the company's chief executive officer issued a letter to customers attempting to explain the company's decision, and he did indeed apologize as Coombs' (2007) SCCT advises for a crisis within the "intentional or preventable" cluster. But this letter fell short of both consumers' and communication experts' expectations, and ultimately backfired as publics deemed the apology insincere (Lukaszewski, 2011).

Consumer criticism is nothing new, but a shift in power has taken place as social media channels now provide the customer with an equal ability to have a voice and to influence an organization's behaviors (Friedman, 2011). Although Netflix, Bank of America, and Verizon reversed their initial decisions, it should be noted that these are not examples of two-way symmetrical communication. These crises occurred because the companies were engaged in one-way conversations with their customers (Friedman, 2011). If any of these organizations had utilized social media networks to solicit input from respective customers *prior* to announcing a change in fees or business practices, then, as Grunig's research indicates, the reaction from key publics would likely have been quite different, the crisis could have been averted, and the brand reputations of these organizations would not have garnered further negative attention from such media giants as *The New York Times*. Moreover, these businesses could have successfully implemented the desired changes to move a profitable business model forward.

Theory versus Practice

Month after month, organizational crises are unfolding within a fast-paced, online, and global environment. The examples thus far indicate that most organizations had not effectively engaged in social media prior to the crisis event. Further, most continue to struggle with the speed and reach of negative brand messages, which now exist in perpetuity. Each organization's seemingly poor preparation and fumbled initial crisis response indicate a lack of congruence between the ideals of academic crisis communications research and actual public relations practice. Coombs has acknowledged that there has been limited research to test the crisis recommendations put-forth by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 722). And, when tested, there has been notable evidence of the incongruence between theory and practice. For instance, Fussell Sisco, Collins, and Zoch (2009) used Coombs' SCCT to conduct a study regarding The American Red Cross' crisis management. Although best known for responding to crises around the world, this charitable organization has also had a few of its own crises to manage – from management scandals to questionable use of donations intended for victims of specific crisis events (e.g. September 11th). In a review of articles from 1997 to 2007 regarding major organizational crises encountered by the American Red Cross, the researchers identified which of the SCCT's three response strategies (deny, diminish or rebuild) were employed by the organization. For articles noting the *victim* or *accident* level of organizational responsibility, the *diminish* response strategy was most frequently used. These findings suggested that the Red Cross had overused the diminish strategy and the researchers commented that the Red Cross had only chosen the appropriate response strategy one-third of the time. The researchers also noted that the SCCT would have called for the diminish strategy in only 27% of the total cases. They indicated that the Red Cross' frequent use of this approach was a means to generate a quick response to the intense media attention of a particular crisis (p. 26). In their conclusion, they argued, "one cannot but wonder how much more reputational improvement the Red Cross might have seen had it incorporated theory into practice" (p. 26).

As previously noted in Chapter 1, many of the current theoretical frameworks regarding crisis management and the practice of international public relations do not yet fully address the impact of social media usage by global publics. For instance, the cultural-economic model calls for public relations practitioners to be "cultural intermediaries," and some practitioners may be heeding this advice when managing an organization's proactive outreach to maintain and attract new publics. However, when managing crises of global reach, most practitioners still appear to fall back on an ethnocentric (Curtin and Gaither, 2007) or homogeneous (Western) approach (Barber, 1992). Further, many of the crisis frameworks referenced in this paper seem to *promote* a homogeneous or "one-size-fits-all" approach to crisis management. For example, should an international organization consider applying the "diminish" strategy in one region and "rebuild" in another? And what are best practices for reputation management when it is so easy for key publics to discover conflicting messages online? Freitag (2002) and other communication scholars have argued that if practitioners are striving to obtain public relations excellence (Grunig, 1992), then there is a need for increased attention and adequate preparation in international public relations practice – and this should begin in colleges and universities.

In summary, "the overall state of unreadiness" (Lawrence, 2011) has exposed too many organizations to heightened and potentially long-term reputational damage. Social media have enabled local and global publics to readily congregate and demand worldwide attention. Therefore, organizations need to take advantage of new communication technologies in order to effectively communicate with their key publics. Likewise, public relations professionals must engage in new media and assume a leadership role. As defenders of an organization's reputation, public relations professionals must demonstrate an understanding of how to build and maintain positive relationships with key publics in an online, global environment. By anticipating potential threats to an organization, public relations professionals can help to diffuse issues before crises emerge. However, if an issue escalates, public relations professionals must be knowledgeable of best practices in crisis communication, especially those grounded in theoretical research.

Crisis management, emerging media, and globalization are three variables that, in today's complex world, are directly related and intertwined concerns for organizations and, more broadly, the public relations profession. Based on the preceding literature review and in order to prepare investigation of these three areas of concern, the following questions were raised:

- RQ1: How have specific contemporary international organizations handled crisis events?
- RQ2: What role did emerging media play in these organizational crisis events?
- RQ3: Did these contemporary organizations demonstrate a global perspective in handling crisis events?

Chapter 3 details the methodology used to conduct case study research in an effort to address each of these key overarching issues.

Chapter 3: Methods

This research utilized exploratory content and textual analyses of traditional print and online media to study two recent cases whereby new/social media played important roles in the management of specific crisis issues that directly impacted companies with internationally-recognized brands. The research focused on the use of new/social media, both by the organizations in their crisis communication efforts and by key publics during the same timeframes. It also explored the organizations' communicative outreach to various global audiences.

Theoretical Framework

There are several best practices, grounded in theoretical research, for how an organization should manage its crisis communications with key publics. The selected theoretical frameworks for this study are Coombs' (2006, 2007) Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Grunig's et al. (1992) "Excellence", two-way symmetrical communication theory.

As previously noted, Coombs' SCCT posited that public relations crisis situations are better managed if an organization implements specific crisis response strategies that are aligned with the nature of the crisis situation (Sisco, Collins, & Zoch, 2009). He maintained that stakeholder perceptions or reactions, which can be anticipated based upon crisis history, will dictate which crisis response strategy or strategies (inform, deny, diminish, or rebuild) will best serve to safeguard the organization's reputational assets (Coombs, 2007, p. 174). Grunig's et al. (1992) "excellence" theory argued that public relations professionals with the expertise, strategic insight, and propensity toward two-way symmetrical communication (which utilizes research and dialogue to manage conflicts) will ultimately build stronger relationships with key publics, including activist publics. This research recognizes the inherent two-way communicative nature of social media and understands that key publics now extend to a global environment.

Case Selection

Case studies are commonly utilized in public relations research and are especially useful to "expand our understanding of theoretical propositions and hypotheses where (a) the context is important, and (b) the investigator cannot manipulate events" (Yin 1992). Additionally, Cutler (2004) noted that good case study research, if properly applied, can be beneficial to practitioners as it can "balance the influence of quantitative research which tends to isolate research problems from the processes of public relations practice that are embedded in social or organizational contexts" (p. 365).

In an effort to provide public relations professionals with a useful comparison of recent crisis events that were either *incited* by social media discourse or *managed or escalated* by social media discourse, the researcher applied the following criteria when selecting organizations for exploration: (a) the crisis event took place in the first half the 2011 calendar year; (b) the affected organization is a well-known global brand; (c) the crisis events were different types (i.e., *incited* by or *managed/escalated* by social media discourse); (d) major (historically legitimated) media outlets, both traditional print and online, reported on the crisis event; and (e) the event was discussed on social networks (e.g., blogs, Facebook, and/or Twitter). Using these criteria, the two organizational crisis case studies selected for this research were Aflac® (March, 2011) and Sony PlayStation® Network (April, 2011). The Sony PlayStation crisis event case involved an outside entity's network breach of the popular gaming system. The Aflac crisis, on the other hand, was incited by specific jokes regarding Japan's tsunami tragedy, which were issued by the organization's "voice of the duck" comedic personality, Gilbert Gottfried. The jokes were posted on Gottfried's personal Twitter account.

Research Questions

Upon case selection, the following research questions were investigated to address three key variables – crisis management (RQ1), emerging media (RQ2), and global context (RQ3):

RQ1: How have specific contemporary international organizations handled crisis events?

R1a: What type of crisis occurred (i.e. victim, accidental, intentional)?

R1b: Was the crisis incited by or did it emerge as a result of a social media comment or posting?

R1c: How quickly did the organization respond to the crisis event?

R1d: Which situational crisis response strategy (from Coombs' SCCT) did the organization first adopt? (Inform, Deny, Diminish or Rebuild)

R1e: At any time, did the organization change/move away from its initial crisis response strategy (from Coombs' SCCT?)

R1f: Did the organization handle the crisis proactively (get ahead of issue and inform publics) or reactively (only responded when outside forces – government or traditional media – pushed a response)?

RQ2: What role did emerging media play in these organizational crisis events?

R2a: What presence did the organization have in the online environment at the time of the crisis event? (Web pages, Facebook, Twitter, blog, etc.)?

R2b: Did the organization utilize social media proactively (get ahead of issue and inform publics) or reactively (only responded when outside forces – government or traditional media – pressed for a response)?

R2c: During the crisis event, did the organization (and its public relations professionals) engage in two-way communication with key publics (per Grunig's Theory) in an online environment?

R2d: If "yes" to R2c, is there evidence to suggest that key public's behavior/attitudes were positively impacted by organization engaging in two-way communications?

R2e: Was the organization's leadership (i.e. CEO) negatively reviewed by traditional and/or online/social media during or after the crisis event?

R2f: Was the organization's brand negatively reviewed by traditional and/or online/social media during or after the crisis event?

R2g: After the crisis event, did the organization implement any changes to its online communications practices?

RQ3: Did these contemporary organizations demonstrate a global perspective in handling crisis events?

R3a: Is there evidence to suggest that the organization handled the crisis event differently in other countries? (ethnocentric, polycentric, hybrid approaches)

R3b: If "yes" to R3a, is there evidence to suggest that local and global stakeholder's perceptions/attitudes were positively impacted by the organization's handling of the crisis event differently in other countries?

Content and Textual Analysis

This study sought to answer the above research questions by identifying themes or patterns using content and textual analysis methods. Zito (1975) defined content analysis as "a methodology by which the researcher seeks to determine the manifest content of the written, spoken or published communications by systematic, objective and quantitative analysis" (p. 27). In simpler terms, he noted that it is a quantitative method generally used to count meaning units (words, phrases or themes in the text) to analyze qualitative (written) material and to measure an attitude toward a topic (p. 37). Weber (1990) further defined content analysis as "a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text. These inferences are about the sender of the message, the message itself, or the audience of the message" (p. 9). He noted that content analysis is used for many purposes such as revealing international differences in communication content, comparing media or levels of communication, and describing trends in communication content (p. 9). Media content analysis remains a popular research methodology as mass media have been shown to have significant impact on public awareness, perception, and behavior (Macnamara, 2006). As Arya (2011) noted when studying print media's political influence in India, "This process is basically descriptive and certain well-defined textual codes or elements are teased out by measuring the occurring frequency" (p. 100)

Still, most researchers recommend a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies in order to "fully understand the meanings and possible impacts of media texts" (Macnamara, 2006, p. 6). To that end, and recognizing this study's concern for cultural context, textual analysis (a type of qualitative analysis) of the media content was also conducted. Textual analysis "focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text" (Fursich, 2009, p. 240). Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) noted that, unlike quantitative content analysis, qualitative analysis usually consists of purposively selected texts and is "mainly inductive, grounding the examination of topics and themes, as well as the inferences drawn from them, in the data" (pp. 1-2). Using historical text, this researcher engaged in quantitative content analysis and textual discourse analysis to ascertain basic themes that emerged from broad text.

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis studied include specific traditional and online newspaper texts, as well as online postings from the organization, its customers, and influential bloggers. Whole texts (i.e. headline and overall tone) as well as key statements within each text from either the organization or its key publics were reviewed to identify themes or patterns. According to Weber (1990), when reviewing for themes, whole texts are acceptable units of study provided the text is short such as editorials or stories (p. 23).

Media Selection

The specific print and online media selected for this research represent a mix of well-known, reputable communications and business media, and a variety of consumer or industry blogs. An attempt was made to review the same media (e.g. *The New York Times*) for both cases; however, as the studied cases are from different industries, there were varying trade and global publications that covered these specific crisis events. Additionally, the different styles of crisis response attracted the attention of different types of consumer and trade blogs. Therefore, the researcher used the *LexisNexus® Academic* database to find articles that were published during the designated timeframe, and which represented a sampling from similar media types: business, public relations/marketing, consumer blogs, and global media.

A complete listing of the media articles can be found in Appendix A (Sony PlayStation) and Appendix B (Aflac). The researcher also reviewed each organization's web site, press releases, and a variety of organizational and public comments posted on the company's blog, Facebook page, and Twitter site during the studied crisis timeframe.

Reference Period

For the content analysis, the period of study begins with the date when a major media outlet first noted the crisis and extends through the timeframe of significant media coverage regarding the crisis event. In both cases, the timeframe ranged six to eight weeks. For the Sony PlayStation case, the researcher reviewed the media texts during the timeframe of April 20 through June 4, 2011. For the Aflac case, the researcher reviewed media texts during the timeframe of March 14 through May 15, 2011. For the textual analysis, the period of study in both cases also included historical records of web postings, social media postings, and traditional media coverage of the two months immediately prior to the crisis and the two months after the significant volume of media coverage subsided.

Coding

Weber (1990) noted that before the coding process can begin, the researcher must identify what will be studied, as well as the substantive questions and relevant theories to be investigated (p. 21). Upon completion of these steps, the previously noted research questions were separated into quantitative (content) and qualitative (textual) categories, resulting in two coding forms for analyses (see Appendices C and D). In order to answer these questions, the researcher sought to identify themes or patterns across texts. For the quantitative content analysis, the researcher reviewed the entire text of each media article during the reference period and counted the number of times the following were mentioned per article: (a) organization's response time criticized, questioned, or challenged; (b) organization's brand perception discussed; (c) organization's crisis apology noted; (d) specific negative comments from key publics about the organization; (e) specific negative comments from key publics about the organization's executive/s; and (f) use of social media by the organization. For the qualitative textual analysis, the researcher reviewed the entire text of each media article during the reference period in order to ascertain: (a) Which of Coombs' SCCT was first adopted by the organization?; (b) Did the organization change/move away from the initial crisis response strategy? (c) Did the organization handle the crisis proactively or reactively?; (d) Does evidence exist that the organization engaged in two-way communication as advocated by Grunig?; and (e) Does evidence exist to suggest the organization handled the crisis differently in other countries?

The presentation of the research data and findings for each case are provided in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively, and are organized to address the three primary research questions:

- RQ1: How have specific contemporary international organizations handled crisis events?
- RQ2: What role did emerging media play in these organizational crisis events?

- RQ3: Did these contemporary organizations demonstrate a global perspective in handling crisis events?

Reliability and Validity

It is important to note that case study research, content analysis, and textual analysis each has limitations. For example, textual analysis is often assumed to result in incomplete findings (Fursich, 2009), and scientific quantitative research is preferred for the development and testing of theoretical propositions (Cutler, 2004). However with regard to case study research, Cutler noted:

> If, for example, a researcher was interested in aspects of crisis management, he or she could select an instance, or instances of crisis management to study in depth. Many examples of public relations practice are defined by the issues they manage, by the approach taken (media relations for example) or by the roles of practitioners, and are essentially ready-made cases. (p. 368)

This research was designed to identify content themes and patterns over a specific period of time. It did not attempt to prove a hypothesis whereby performing statistical analysis would be required. To address reliability, the researcher employed consistent coding practices across all analyzed media (see Appendices E & F). Macnamara (2006) noted that validity of content analysis is achieved by thoroughly understanding the research objectives, by conducting preliminary reading of a sub-set of relevant content, and through a careful selection of the sample of media content to be analyzed (p. 13). Additionally, semantic validity (Krippendorf, 1980) was addressed as the researcher's analysis of whole media texts considered challenges such as synonyms or words with multiple meanings, areas that are not easily distinguished by computer-aided analysis (Weber, 1990, p. 21).

Chapter 4: Sony PlayStation Case Research Findings

Although this case took place a few weeks after the Aflac case, it is the more "traditional" crisis case and is therefore being presented first. As previously noted, for both cases, whole print and online media texts as well as specific statements within each text were coded and analyzed in order to identify common themes or patterns. Additionally, the organization's external communication including press releases, the company's web site, and its social media presence (i.e. Facebook and Twitter sites) were reviewed. In order to answer each of the research questions, the data were analyzed by considering the crisis reaction and/or response from the media, general external publics, and the organization itself. By triangulating the data, this research uncovered multiple ways of understanding how the organizational crisis unfolded and was perceived by various key publics. It is also important to note that today's new digital environment enabled both the researcher and the organization's key publics with a means to readily capture previous reports about the organization, which occurred prior to the studied crisis event. Therefore, the totality of the information gathered from a variety of sources over a specific period of time served to reveal a high level of complexity in answering the research questions.

Utilizing "Sony PlayStation" as the search-word criteria for the *LexisNexis* database search, a total of 559 articles were identified during the April 19 – June 4, 2011 timeframe. After weeding out duplications and those articles that were unrelated to the crisis event, the researcher identified 84 articles from a total of 20 separate business, public relations trade, and global publications to be thoroughly analyzed for this crisis case study research. Six of the 20 selected publications represented 82% of the articles reviewed. See Table 4.1 and Appendix A for a list of articles from each publication.

Table 4.1: Total Sony PSN print and online articles studied by media type

Sony PlayStation	**Total # of Articles**
Business Media(U.S.)	
The New York Times	5
New York Times Blog	7
Subtotal	*12*
PR/Tech Media	
PR/Marketing Week	3
Mashable Blog	13
Subtotal	*16*
Global Media	
Financial Times *	16
Venture Beat Blog	26
Miscellaneous	14
Subtotal	*56*
TOTAL	**84**

**Financial Times* articles originated from various countries

Understanding the Crisis Event

Types of crises: Victim, accidental or intentional (R1a). The Sony PlayStation® Network is a global operation, but its parent company is based in Japan. In this crisis case, the organization and subsequent media reported that there was a breach of the organization's system by an outside entity. Through this security breach, the hacker illegally infiltrated and potentially stole sensitive customer information from the Sony PlayStation® Network (PSN), Sony's online service for use with its PlayStation video game consoles, as well as its entertainment service platform, Qriocity™, which connects many of Sony's network-enabled devices including movies and television shows (*Thai Press Reports*, April 28, 2011). In the company's blog post on April 23, 2011, the organization acknowledged that the system was "brought down by an external intrusion"

(*VentureBeat*, April 23, 2011). Then in its public press release on May 1, 2011, Sony further indicated that there was a "criminal cyber-attack on the company's data center located in San Diego, California." Following the company's lead on the "cyber-attack," the business, trade, and global media reported on the crisis in a similar manner. For example, in 12 out of 13 of the studied *Mashable* articles, the term "hacker" or "hacker attack" was used within the body of the story. Further, one-third of all articles reviewed used the words "breach," "security breach," and "hacked" in the article's headline.

Noting the above, according to Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2007), the Sony PlayStation Network (PSN) crisis case would be classified under the "victim" cluster. However, Coombs (2006) also noted that the organization's history of crises may alter the initial reputational threat – moving stakeholders' perceptions from minimal attributions of crisis responsibility to very strong attributions of crisis responsibility (p. 169). Although throughout the crisis Sony PSN maintained its position as "victim," social media discourse began to reveal another side to the story – especially in one blog, *VentureBeat*, which followed the crisis closely and reported on the Sony PSN crisis 26 times during the six-week studied timeframe. The writers of this blog noted that Sony's systems had been previously compromised by a group known as "Anonymous," resulting in Sony suing its leader for violating the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (Takahashi, April 23, 2011). In another story, they shared how one security expert told the United States Congress that other security experts knew that Sony was running outdated versions of the Apache Web server software that did not have a firewall installed (Lynley, May 5, 2011). Similarly, the *Financial Times* (Asia edition) noted, "Sony should have been on its guard after Anonymous, the activist hacking collective, declared it a target in early April, angered by its lawsuit against a tinkerer who modified his PlayStation games console" (Waters, April 30, 2011). The media perception (business, trade, and global) of Sony's poor management of the crisis situation negatively impacted the organization's standing as "victim." A *Financial Times* article may have summed this up best by stating, "It is too early to say whether Sony's response to the security breach will leave it looking more like an offender than a victim" (Soble, April 28, 2011, para. 7). Therefore, under Coombs' SCCT, this crisis cannot be fully positioned in the victim cluster as social media discourse identified this organization's stronger attributions of crisis responsibility.

Timeliness of crisis response (R1c). According to the organization's public statements including an April 23rd blog post from its company spokesperson, upon receiving evidence that an unauthorized intrusion occurred on April 20th, Sony immediately shut down its PlayStation network (*VentureBeat,* April 23, 2011). However, as *VentureBeat* noted, the April 23rd post was the first time that Sony PSN notified its 77 million "frustrated" users about the reason for the shutdown of the system. As well, it took another four days before the company made an announcement regarding the potential data breach (Menn and Palmer, *Financial Times*, Asia, April 28, 2011).

Overall, Sony was criticized for not responding quickly to this particular crisis event. Of the studied media articles, 41% specifically challenged or criticized Sony's response time. Yet the company's chief executive officer "argued that Sony had responded to the attack in a timely manner and regularly shared information with customers" (Bilton, *New York Times Blogs*, May 17, 2011). Originally, the crisis appeared to be the organization's ability to simply get the system back online. A week later, the crisis sparked a media discussion regarding the data breach with headlines such as, "What Sony does next is critical to its future in games" (Takahashi, *VentureBeat*, April 30, 2011) and "Sony loses face over theft of PS3 data" (*Financial Times*, Asia, April 28, 2011). In the latter article (Soble, 2011), it was noted how PSN users had vented on the company's blog forum:

> One gamer called GrandpaHomer reported his e-mail account, linked to his PlayStation account, had been taken over by hackers on Monday, a day before Sony's announcement, and used to send out spam e-mails. 'Only Sony is to be blamed for holding this info back that long,' he wrote. (para. 21)

By May 4th, the *Financial Times* (2011) questioned, "Is Sony right to take its time to reveal security breaches?" In this article, three communication experts were posed this question and their responses ranged from "time is no longer a company's friend" to "my hunch is that this will do Sony little long-term damage, provided it offers some free content and services to users who have been disrupted." Similarly, *PRWeek* (Luker, May 6, 2011) quoted an Edelman global vice-chairman as saying, "In the age of instant comms, there isn't the space to act and communicate separately." Yet he also noted, "This is always challenging, particularly for some cultures – like Japan's – where what you do is seen as more important than what you say. However, in the 7/24 global environment, they can amount to the same thing" (para. 5 & 6).

Since the crisis event originated in the United States, Sony's slow response time received a stern reaction from yet another key public: the United States government. On April 27th, *The New York Times* noted that Connecticut Senator Richard Blumenthal had cited concerns that many PlayStation users are children and he wanted to know why Sony had not notified its customers immediately about the security breach. The *Financial Times* went further quoting Blumenthal as saying, "I am absolutely appalled. The facts show that Sony purposefully deceived people and misled them before. It has now finally begun coming clean" (April 28, para. 5). Then in a follow-up article, "Sony chief defends response to PlayStation data breach" (*The New York Times Blogs*, May 17, 2011), it was noted that Sony's slow response had prompted the United States' House subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade to call for hearings and to introduce new data and security legislation to better protect consumers' online data. At first, Sony declined to attend the subcommittee hearings stating that it was currently involved in its own "ongoing intensive investigation" (*New York Times Blogs*, May 28, 2011). By end of May, though, *New York Times'* blogger Nick Bilton noted that the company had finally agreed to testify. He added, "Since the huge cyber attack on the PlayStation Network, Sony has become the poster child for data and security reform in Congress" (May 28, 2011, para. 8).

Types of crisis response: Deny, diminish, inform or rebuild (R1d and R1e). As previously noted, the SCCT offers four crisis response strategies – deny, diminish, inform, or rebuild – and the theory argues that the crisis manager needs to select the strategy that best serves to protect the organization. In fact, Coombs' SCCT (2006) is "premised on matching the crisis response strategy to the demands of the crisis situation" (p. 255). Coombs further divided these four strategies into categories. For instance, the *deny* strategy has three possible categories – attack the accuser, denial (assertion that there is no crisis), or scapegoat. *Scapegoat* is when the crisis manager blames some person or outside group for the crisis (Coombs, 2007). Under the *diminish* strategy, the organization can “excuse” itself by minimizing its responsibility by either denying intent to do harm or by claiming that events which triggered the crisis were out of the organization’s control. Coombs did not separate the inform strategy into separate categories.

Coombs noted that most stakeholders learn about a crisis from news media and, indeed, how news media “frame” the crisis can determine the required crisis response strategy (2007, p. 173). Accordingly, the researcher attempted to break out specific articles that reflected news reporting *on Sony’s position/communication* as it pertained to one of the four potential SCCT crisis response strategies. Table 4.2 provides a summary of how the news media framed the organization’s portrayal of this crisis event; however, 56% of the articles studied either reported solely on facts or offered commentary from other key publics. Therefore, these articles were not counted for this part of the analysis.

Table 4.2: Identified SCCT Crisis Response Strategies Used by Sony PSN

SCCT Strategy Applied	***Total # of media articles denoting company strategy***	***% of media articles denoting company strategy***
Deny/Scapegoat	23	27%
Diminish	0	0
Inform	11	13%
Rebuild/Compensation or Bolstering	6	7%

Under the SCCT, Sony’s initial crisis response strategy fell under the *deny/scapegoat* category. At first, Sony PSN failed to acknowledge that a crisis occurred by simply calling it a “service outage” on their April 21st blog posting. In this posting, the spokesperson noted that it could take a few days to restore service while they investigated the cause of the Network outage (Takahashi, *VentureBeat*, April 21, 2011).

This resulted in *VentureBeat's* speculation for the outage, questioning if the prior day's PSN service update "was the cause of the crash." Even more noteworthy is that no other mainstream media outlet reported on the issue until April 23rd, when the company first announced the reason for the outage, blaming an outside entity (scapegoat strategy) for an "external intrusion on our system" (Takahashi, *VentureBeat*, April 23, 2011). In fact, of the media studied, most posted their *first* article on the crisis event as late as April 27th. These post-crisis media reports were triggered by an April 26th blog posting from Sony PSN's spokesperson, which stated that the outage was the result of an attack whereby an "unauthorized person has obtained personal information about the account holders, and may have comprised confidential information such as credit card numbers" (*The New York Times*, April 27, 2011).

As the crisis unfolded and the above-mentioned additional challenges came to light, the company continued to alternate its crisis response strategy from *deny/scapegoat* to *inform* and then to *rebuild*. In its efforts to keep key publics *informed* about the outage and when service would be restored, Sony PSN utilized the company's web site, five press releases, and various social media outlets (especially its company blog). During the studied timeframe, each of the company-issued press releases triggered additional commentary from the media (over 63% of the articles studied were published after May 5th). The five issued press releases were as follows:

1) *May 1, 2011* – Some PlayStation® Network and Qriocity™ Services to be available this week; Phased rollout of services to begin regionally; system security enhanced to provide greater protection of personal information.

2) *May 14, 2011* – Restoration of PlayStation® Network and Qriocity™ services begins

3) *May 27, 2011* – Phase restoration of PlayStation®Network and Qriocity™ services also begins in Japan and Asian countries and regions

4) *May 31, 2011* – Sony and Sony Computer Entertainment announce full restoration of PlayStation® Network services; Full PlayStation® Network Services Restored; Music Unlimited Powered by Qriocity™ to Become Available on PlayStation®3, PSP® (PlayStation®Portable), VAIO and other PCs

5) *June 2, 2011* – Full restoration of PlayStation Network services begins today; full PlayStation Network services restored.

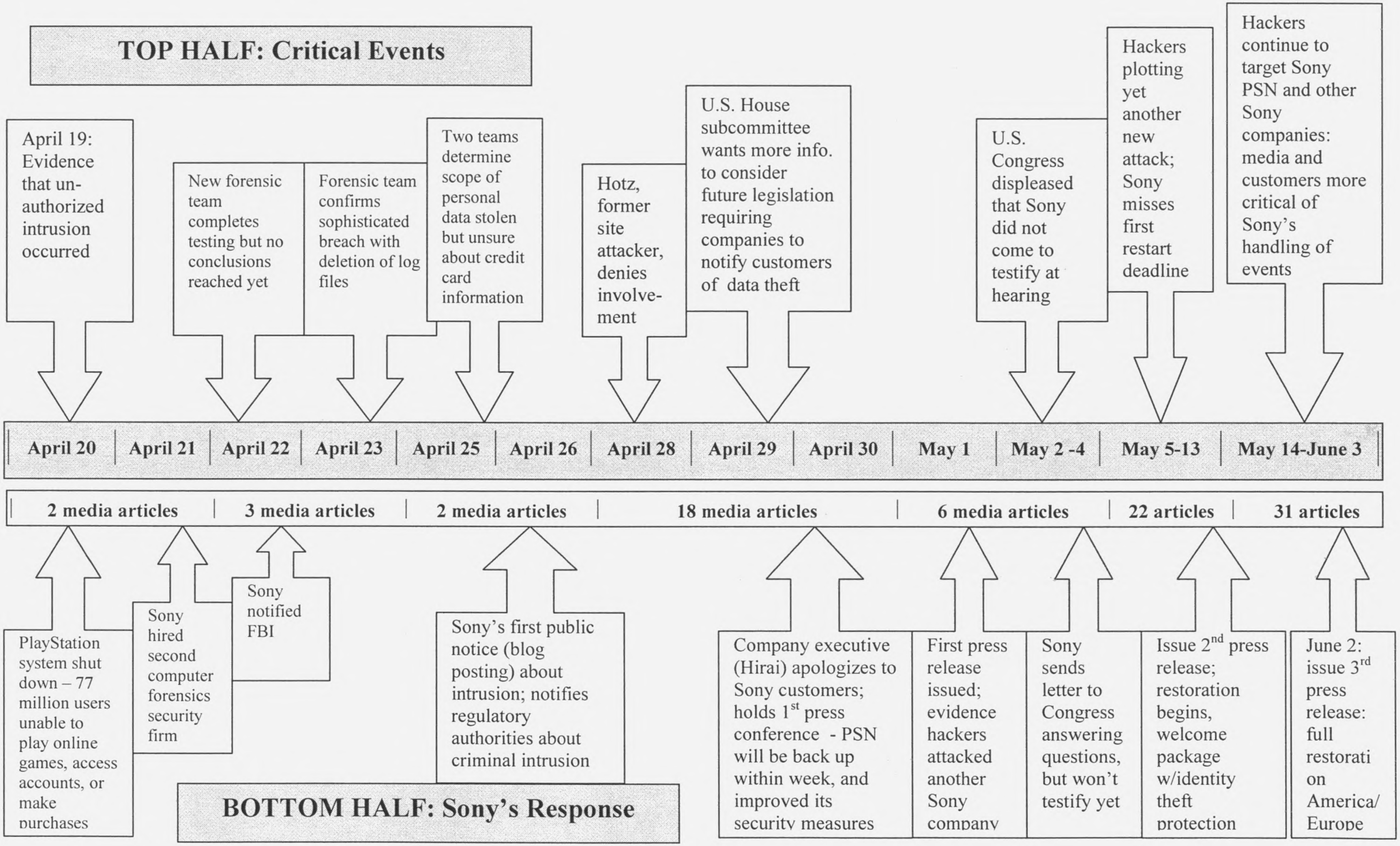
From mid-May through early June, the organization utilized the same communication resources as it began to apply its *rebuild* strategy, an "attempt to improve the organization's reputation by offering material and/or symbolic forms of aid to victims" (Coombs, 2007, p. 172). For instance, Sony launched a YouTube video (Sony PlayStation, 2011) from its chief executive, to first *inform* about "greatly-updated" security measures that the organization has put into place and, next, to *rebuild* by promoting its "Welcome Back" package (which included free games and movie rentals, and free identity-theft protection for its customers). Additionally, the executive expressed that Sony PSN "will do everything we can to regain your trust and confidence." Yet while Howard Stringer, the chief executive, apologized to Sony's customers (gamers) for the PSN outage, he also applied a *rebuild/bolstering* strategy by reminding stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too (Coombs, 2007, p. 270):

> I wish we could have gotten the answers we need sooner, but forensic analysis is a complex, time-consuming process. Hackers, after all, do their best to cover their tracks, and it took some time for our experts to find those tracks and begin to identify what personal information had or 'had not' been taken … we are facing a very man-made event, a criminal attack on us, and on you. (*VentureBeat*, May 5, 2011)

It should be noted that Coombs' SCCT advocates for crisis managers to maintain consistency in crisis response strategies, further noting that by mixing certain strategies the organization will "erode the effectiveness of the overall response" (2007, p. 173). An analysis of whether Sony PSN utilized the best or proper mix of crisis responses, per what has been represented in Table 2 will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Proactive versus reactive crisis response (R1f). Overall, this crisis was managed reactively. The company shut down the PSN for five full days with little explanation for the "service outage" that halted customer access to online games, customer accounts, movie purchases, and other entertainment offered on the network (Takahashi, *VentureBeat,* May 4, 2011). Within two days, *VentureBeat* (May 4, 2011) noted that the company did inform the FBI, and it engaged outside security consultants to assist with the investigation; but it was not until April 26th that it informed the news media, its customers, and a variety of states' regulatory authorities about the "criminal intrusion." A detailed six-week timeline (see Figure 4.1) highlights Sony's reactive response style as the crisis unfolded. It also outlines the number of media articles that were triggered by each of Sony's formal communication notifications.

Figure 4.1: Sony PlayStation Crisis Timeline



Understanding the Role of Social Media

Organization's online presence prior to the crisis (R2a). Sony PlayStation had/has a very robust presence on the Internet and in social media. In the United States, the company has a web site - http://us.playstation.com/psn/ and a company blog: http://blog.us.playstation.com/category/psn/. The same is true for Europe: http://blog.eu.playstation.com/. All country/regional sites (over 40 in total) can be found at: http://uk.playstation.com/country-selector/. The organization also has separate Facebook fan pages and Twitter sites. (For example, in the United States: http://www.facebook.com/PlayStation and http://twitter.com/Playstation; in Europe: http://www.facebook.com/SonyPlaystation and https://twitter.com/PlayStationEU.) The company also has a presence on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/sonyplaystation.

Social media's role in the crisis (R1b and R2b). The organization's public statements (i.e. blog postings and press releases) as well as the studied media articles acknowledged that this crisis was a result of an outside entity illegally infiltrating and stealing sensitive customer information from Sony's PSN. Although the crisis was subsequently discussed on social media, it did not originate there.

Sony PlayStation had/has an active blog universe and the organization did post about its "network outage" on April 21st, one day after the PSN service was shutdown. However, the company did not reveal the cause of the outage or the potential data breach until several days later. Of the media articles studied, 14% referenced the company's use of social media, especially its blog, as being used by the organization to post crisis updates. Yet aside from the blog forum, this research found no evidence of the organization's use of social media to proactively inform key publics during the first two weeks of the outage. In fact, from April 19th (the day before the crisis hit) until May 6th there were no postings from the company on its Sony PlayStation Facebook page. The *New York Times* (April 27, 2011) noted that one social media expert from Sweden and the father of a six-year-old Sony PSN user said, "Sony is pretty much doing everything wrong." He then added about his daughter, "She doesn't have any direct purchasing power, but her direct influence in what my wife and I buy is enormous … Sony is losing the battle over her" (para. 8 & 9).

As it moved to rebuild its brand image by mid-May, the company did post a detailed five minute YouTube video (Sony PlayStation, 2011) from its president and group chief executive officer, Kazuo Hirai (refer to R1e for more information). However one public relations expert in crisis communication noted that organizations such as Sony need to recognize the importance of acting more quickly in order to earn the public's trust: "Sony is now doing this through sites, blogs and Twitter feeds – but its users may see this as too little, too late" (*PRWeek*, May 6, 2011, para. 4).

Comments regarding the organization's leadership (R2e). In 7% of the articles reviewed, the company's leadership was negatively discussed or referenced. Although a relatively small percentage, it is noteworthy as 46% of the articles reviewed were neutral in tone (no strong bias/comments one way or another). In fact, when reviewing only the articles with a negative tone (i.e., includes negative headline or negative comments made by reporter or customers), 13% specifically mentioned the organization's CEO, Howard Stringer, or other senior leadership (e.g. Kazuo Hirai) in a negative manner. One example of this was featured in the headline of the *Daily Telegraph*, "Pressure to quit builds on Sony's Stringer" (Ruddick, May, 2011). Still, other global media reported that the leaders, including presumed successor Hirai, had bowed deeply (a Japanese cultural expression of sincere apology) when they apologized for the security breach (O'Grady, *Business Day/South Africa*, May 4, 2011 and Ruddick, *The Daily Telegraph*, May 4, 2011). It should be noted that beyond the specific timeframe studied, there were additional calls for Sony's then CEO (Stringer) to step down; and it has been recently reported that he will step down in April, 2012 (Benedetti, 2011 and Waugh, 2012).

Although this research found no specific mention of the CEO or the company's senior leadership being discussed by gamers on social media, there were occasional mentions pertaining to Sony's "staff." For example, on Facebook:

- *Viki Govier, May 31*: "*You guys at Sony* said in earlier blogs that we would have full service by end of May and today it is that day and you let us down again by saying it will be up by the end of the week what day is that cause I'm sick of being let down by you now;" and
- *George Jones, June 2:* "I paid for PS plus and since the first month it's been appalling. Do not buy it. *Read this before Sony remove my comment like they did the last 6 times...*"

Considering that the general public is less likely to know the CEO's name or the names of a company's senior staff, it is not surprising to find common language usage such as "you guys" or the brand name to collectively reflect the organization's leadership. However, in this case any specific negative leadership references by the public via social media were generally as infrequent as those by the print and online media.

Comments regarding the organization's brand (R2f). Although it could be argued that every crisis-related article has the potential to negatively affect an organization's brand (87% of studied articles mentioned the Sony or PlayStation Network brand name in the headline), the Sony brand was specifically referenced in 40% of the articles reviewed (see Table 4.3). However, most of the media commentary either questioned how the organization's brand will rebound after the crisis or discussed how the organization was attempting to salvage its brand reputation by offering free games to its PlayStation Network users (Lynley, *VentureBeat*, May 16, 2011) and a one year, $1 million identity-theft insurance policy to U.S. gamers who were impacted by the breach (*BestWire*, May 11, 2011). Additionally, approximately 17% of the articles studied specifically noted the company's apology for the service outage, but only a small percentage of these articles (14%) questioned the sincerity of the company's apology.

Table 4.3: Media Coverage of Sony PSN Crisis (April 19 – June 3, 2011)

% Referenced Brand in Headline	% Referenced Brand Reputation or Financial Impact within Article	% Noted Company's Apology
87%	40%	17%

Table 4.4 identifies the percentage of articles coded by the researcher as "negative" versus "neutral" (Note: No articles were coded as "positive" as none of the studied articles praised Sony's handling of this crisis event). This table also captures the percentage of articles, per media type, that negatively reviewed the company's CEO or executive spokesperson. Of note, the public relations/marketing trade publications were much more critical of Sony's handling of this crisis, with 63% of the articles reviewed in this category coded as "negative" in overall tone. Yet none of these articles negatively

commented on the organization's leadership. Rather, the public relations trades were more focused on the poor communication process (e.g. response time).

Table 4.4: Media coverage of Sony PSN crisis by media type (April 19 – June 3, 2011)

Type of Media	Total Articles Reviewed	Percent Negative Tone	Percent Neutral Tone	Percent Negatively Review Company Spokesperson
Business Media (U.S.)	*12*	*50%*	*50%*	*25%*
PR/Tech Media	*16*	*63%*	*37%*	*0%*
Global Media	*56*	*50%*	*50%*	*25%*
TOTAL	**84**	**52%**	**48%**	**7%**

On social media, however, Sony PSN users (a key public) often blasted the company with disparaging remarks, even threatening to go to a Sony PSN competitor. Overall customer sentiment expressed frustration with the length of the outage and the perception of unmet promises by Sony to restore service on a given day. The following are sample excerpts from Sony PlayStation's Facebook page:

- *Peter Hider, May 29*: "It's back online bout f**ing time next time how bout some warnin seriously thinkin about going 2 xbox;"
- *Mark Taylor, May 31*: "Outstanding, try to play psp online says need to change password and come on to get message saying store closed after all the downtime psn has had already. Xbox for the win;" and
- *Steve Grimwood, May 31*: "Losing faith in Sony, this is really soul destroying."

By May 7th, *VentureBeat* (Takahashi) reported that Sony shares had fallen more than 6 percent – just two weeks after the crisis. Additionally, a *PRWeek* "Reputation Survey" released on May 13th (Magee, 2011) indicated that most customers believed the crisis had harmed Sony's reputation yet 62% who owned a PlayStation said they would not consider switching to a competitor. Still, one brand expert predicted the brand would "bounce back" as "Sony is an exceptionally strong brand with a long-established reputation for reliability, innovation and good design" (*Financial Times* - London, May 4, 2011). Chapter 6 discusses the crisis event's overall impact to the Sony PlayStation brand, including an update on where the brand stands one year later.

Post-crisis event online communications practices (R2g). As noted, the organization had actively engaged in social media prior to this crisis event. There is some evidence to suggest that Sony PlayStation began to utilize its online vehicles more frequently (i.e. postings on its blog and Facebook fan page); however, it is not evident whether this outcome is a direct result of this crisis event or merely a factor of continued increasing prominence of social media usage by all publics.

Use of two-way communication with key publics (R2c and R2d): For the studied timeframe, this research found no evidence of two-way symmetrical communication between the organization and its key publics, including its social media usage. Rather, there is evidence that in some cases the organization chose to defer communications with the United States Congress (*The New York Times Blog*, May 17, 2011) and with key bloggers such as those of *VentureBeat* who indicated that Sony did not respond to its inquiries regarding allegations for the service outage (Lynley, April 26, 2011). As for how the organization communicated directly with its customers, it has been previously noted that there was no social media communication for a two-week period, and subsequent communications were sporadic. In one Facebook posting on May 29, a frustrated customer (Marvin Lee James) anxiously awaited *any* type of communication from Sony: "Networks down AGAIN but to make it worse no news on the blog or anything about it!! You think this is the way to treat your loyal customers? ...You're a joke! I'm selling my PS to the first mug who wants it and I'm going to Xbox."

Understanding the Global Perspective

Organization's global crisis approach: Ethnocentric, polycentric, hybrid approaches (R3a and R3b). In a review of the organization's web site, Facebook page, and blog, there is no clear evidence that Sony, a Japanese organization, managed or communicated about this issue any differently in other countries. Therefore, the company predominantly applied an ethnocentric approach to its crisis communication. Certainly in its press releases, the organization acknowledged that it had global customers, and, to the extent that the service outage impacted these global customers, Sony did inform its customers from various countries when their service would be restored (May 1 press release referred to a "phased global rollout of services"). By May 27^{th}, Sony announced a partial restoration of its PSN and Qriocity services for all countries/regions, and by June 2^{nd} it had issued a follow-up press release announcing the *full* restoration of its services in the Americas, Europe/PAL territories, and Asia (excluding Japan, Hong Kong, and South Korea). Although the service outage first took place in the United States, the company provided no explanation as to the how or why it selected certain countries to restore services to before others. In the latter press release, the company simply noted that restoration announcements for the remaining countries would be made "as they become available."

Conversely, a review of print and online media publications showed that the media's style or frequency of reporting differed across domestic and global types. For example, during the studied timeframe, the *Financial Times* reported on this event three times more than *The New York Times,* even though the crisis event occurred in the United States. Further, the Financial Times were more critical of the company's handling of the crisis. A simple comparative analysis of headlines reveals some of this overall tone as the *New York Times* used action terms such as "defends" and "asks" while the *Financial Times* used "loses face," "faces fire," and "point finger" in its headlines. Interestingly, however, neither of these prominent media reported on Sony PSN's efforts to rebuild favor with its customers by offering a "Welcome Back" package or by offering identity theft protection.

Summary of Findings

Whether or not Sony could have *fully* protected itself from this particular crisis event remains unknown. Certainly organizations and governments are vulnerable to hacking or cyber attacks even when the best security measures are in place. However, recognizing that Sony was previously a target of a specific hacker group, there were expectations that Sony should have utilized the most advanced security measures available, yet it was revealed by various media sources that it did not.

From a communication standpoint, Sony's leadership and public relations staff did not adhere to many research-based best practices in crisis management. In fact, this research found:

- Sony's key publics lost faith and patience with the company's slow response time;
- Over 50% of the studied media articles reflected negatively on the company's management of the crisis event;

- There is no evidence of two-way symmetrical communications between the organization and its key publics; and
- The crisis appears to have been managed in the same manner (ethnocentric approach) for all affected global publics.

Furthermore, with regard to Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), there is little evidence that Sony PlayStation applied the appropriate SCCT's strategies to manage this security breach. Rather, there is more evidence to support that Sony reacted to individual events as they unfolded and never anticipated a service outage that would last for several weeks. To that end, Sony's reactive and often silent communication style enabled other key publics to frame the crisis situation, creating doubt for the company's primary position as "victim."

Finally, although this crisis event was not the result of an issue that arose in social media discourse, the organization's utilization of social media to keep key publics informed was haphazard or limited at best. As noted in the literature review, all online comments are archived and discoverable. The details surrounding this crisis event will likely haunt the Sony PlayStation brand for many years to come.

Now for comparative purposes, a second crisis case (which took place during a similar timeframe) is reviewed in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Aflac Case Research Findings

The Aflac crisis case differs from the Sony PlayStation case in two significant ways. First, this crisis event was the result of one person's postings on Twitter; thus this issue was incited by social media. Second, as will be revealed in the upcoming findings, the organization's handling of this event is quite different – from its response time to the company's use of social media to manage the crisis event. However, there is one coincidental but hardly irrelevant similarity between these two cases: For both organizations, Japan is a critical factor in terms of revenue and culture.

By employing the same methodology as the previous case study, the Aflac data was similarly collected and analyzed by considering the crisis reaction and/or response from the print and online media, from general external publics (via social media) and from the organization itself. Once again, this research's triangulated data revealed multiple ways of understanding how the organizational crisis unfolded and was perceived by various key publics.

In order to secure a variety of print and online articles that covered this crisis event, the term "Aflac" was utilized as the search word criteria for the *LexisNexis* database search during the March 14 – May 15, 2011 timeframe. After weeding out duplications and those articles that were unrelated to the crisis event, and in an attempt to have a comparative number of total studied articles for both cases, the researcher identified 85 articles to be thoroughly analyzed for this crisis case study research. These articles represent 14 separate business, public relations' trade, and global publications, as well as 37 different consumer blogs. It should be noted that there was minimal coverage of this crisis event from major print media (e.g. *Financial Times*), yet the blogosphere was an ample source for commentary. See Table 5.1 and Appendix B for a list of articles from each publication.

Table 5.1 - Total Aflac print and online articles studied by media type

Aflac Media	Total Number of Articles Reviewed
Business Media(U.S.)	
The New York Times	*11*
PR/Tech Media	
AdFreak Blog	3
Mashable Blog	6
Subtotal	*9*
Consumer Media	
Miscellaneous Blogs	*49*
Global Media	
Miscellaneous	*16*
TOTAL	**85**

Understanding the Crisis Event

Types of crises: Victim, accidental or intentional (R1a). On Friday, March 11, 2011, Japan suffered a powerful and destructive earthquake and tsunami (Diep, 2011). Within 24 hours, comedian Gilbert Gottfried (also the voice of Aflac's brand icon, the Aflac duck since 2000), posted jokes on his personal Twitter account (@RealGilbert) that Aflac, his employer, and many in the print and online media deemed to be insensitive comments about the Japan disaster. The following are some examples of Gottfried's tweets from March 12, 2011 (*International Business Times*, March 15, 2011):

- "I just split up with my girlfriend, but like the Japanese say, 'there will be another one floating by any minute now';" and
- "Japan is really advanced. They don't go to the beach. The beach comes to them."

By Monday, March 14th, the well-known insurance giant with 75% of its revenue coming from the Japanese market, announced that it had fired Gottfried for his comments (Elliott, *The New York Tim*es, March 15, 2011). According to Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (2007), the Aflac/Gottfried crisis case might have been classified under the "victim" cluster because the organization could be represented as a victim of the crisis as an external agent caused damage (malevolence) to the organization (p. 168). However, Gottfried is a paid contractor, not an external agent, and there is no evidence to suggest that Gottfried intended any malice or damage to Aflac or its brand. Rather, the media and other well-known comedians indicated that Gottfried, who had partnered with Aflac for over a decade (*Guelph Mercury*, March 16, 2011), had a history of making insensitive jokes, including after such disasters as September 11th. Comedian Howard Stern commented, "When the Aflac people hired him to be the Aflac duck, they knew … this is an offensive guy, this is a guy whose humour is offensive. He's made fun of every disaster I've ever heard of" (*The Calgary Herald*, March 18, 2011). Some members of the media agreed:

> If Aflac, which is a top foreign insurance company in Japan and which gets 75% of its revenue from that market, was concerned about courtesy in public communication, it probably should not have hired Gottfried as a spokesperson in the first place. (O'Dell, *Mashable*, March 15, 2011)

Certainly, Twitter and other prominent social media did not exist during the September 11th tragedy; therefore Gottfried's jokes at that time were likely shared with limited audiences. And in this case, Gottfried, who is *not* the voice of the duck in Japan (*Daily the Pak Banker*, March 16, 2011), did publicly apologize for his tweets

(*International Business Times News*, March 16, 2011). Therefore, with evidence of previous history yet no evidence of intentional malice to the organization, this particular social media crisis event does not readily fit into any existing crisis cluster category as outlined in Coombs' SCCT.

Timeliness of crisis response (R1c). Both the organization and the media reported on Aflac's immediate response to Gottfried's "insensitive tweets," and several members of the print and online media praised the company's swift response. Additionally, the Chairwoman and Chief Executive Public Relation Society of America New York, commended Aflac for its "expedient and decisive measures" (Fiske, *The New York Times*, March 24, 2011).

In a post-crisis video interview with *Forbes* (Noer, 2011), Aflac's chief marketing officer (CMO), Michael Zuna explained how Aflac immediately reacted to a public relations crisis event and utilized social media to the company's advantage (June 6, 2011). In this interview, Zuna noted how the company's head of corporate communications had brought the tweets to his attention and that they "immediately said 'boy we have a problem here.'" Zuna further noted that he then called the company's president and chairman with a recommendation that the company needed to fire Gottfried, and, according to Zuna, both leaders agreed with this decision. He then contacted Gottfried's agent while the corporate communications office prepared and issued a press release announcing the firing of Gilbert. He concluded that from the time he was informed about the tweets to the time the company acted upon it was under an hour. The *Forbes* interviewer, Michael Noer, who noted how the Aflac duck is one of the most iconic brand images in America, commented, "It's a good lesson, I think, for crisis management, in terms of PR …you can't let these things sit on somebody's desk for hours, you have to really go on them right away" (Noer, 2011). Zuna responded by stating that the company wanted to act swiftly in order to "control the situation and the news in the manner we felt best represented our brand and our company" (Noer, 2011),

Types of crisis response: Inform, deny, diminish, or rebuild (R1d and R1e). In evaluating Aflac crisis response strategy, particularly with regard to Coombs' SCCT, there are some important points for consideration. For one, although today's viral environment *might* predict that an activist organization would have been offended by Gottfried's tweets, not every negative tweet is destined to become a crisis. Still, Aflac chose to get ahead of any potential negative media and, by doing so through its own press release, the company itself reported or *informed* the media and other publics about the crisis event (Rose, *The Adaptive Marketer*, March 16, 2011). Under Coombs' SCCT, the *inform* strategy should be used to alert key publics that a crisis has occurred and to keep these publics up-to-date on the company's management of the crisis. Even though the company made the decision that a crisis had indeed occurred, it never truly declared the company as the "victim"; rather, it said the victims were the people of Japan. The following statement was provided to the media by Aflac's CMO Michael Zuna:

> Gilbert's recent comments about the crisis in Japan were lacking in humor and certainly do not represent the thoughts and feelings of anyone at Aflac. Aflac Japan – and by extension, Japan itself – is a part of the Aflac family, and there is no place for anything but compassion and concern during these difficult times. (*International Business Times News*, March 16, 2011)

Aflac did inform the media that Gottfried, a paid contractor who therefore cannot be legitimately deemed an *external agent,* had posted tweets that were "lacking in humor" (*International Business Times News*, March 15, 2011). Per the SCCT, the company's explanation of this crisis certainly places blame on Gottfried; but, since he is not "outside the organization," the *deny/scapegoat* strategy does not apply. Further, although Aflac indirectly apologized for his tweets, it did not accept full responsibility for the crisis, and the CEO said that the company did accept Gottfried's formal apology (Hoffman, *Wall St. Cheat Sheet*, March 31, 2011). Therefore, the crisis strategy adopted cannot be classified as *deny/apology*. In evaluating the *diminish/excuse* strategy, the "crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis" (Coombs, 2006, p. 248). There is no strong evidence to support that the company claimed an inability to control the events – although it did note and invoke a "morals clause" in Gottfried's contract (*Say Anything*, March 16, 2011). Therefore, the SCCT strategy chosen by Aflac most closely followed a *bolstering* strategy whereby the organization drew sympathy for stakeholders who are the victim of the crisis while striving to generate new "reputational assets" (Coombs, 2007, p. 172). In fact, the company's first press release on this issue, "Aflac Severs Ties with Gilbert Gottfried," unveiled its *rebuild/bolstering* strategy:

> Aflac will immediately set plans in motion to conduct a nationwide casting call to find a new voice of the iconic Aflac Duck. It should be noted that Gilbert Gottfried is not the voice of the Aflac Duck in Japan. Last week Aflac announced that the company was donating 100 million yen to the International Red Cross for disaster assistance. (March 14, 2011)

The company continued with its bolstering strategy by taking the "new voice of the duck" campaign to Facebook and Twitter, and by issuing three additional press releases:

1) March 24, 2011 – A New Voice to Give the Aflac Duck its Quack Back;
2) March 31, 2011 – Final Call for Aflac Duck Voice Online Auditions; and
3) April 26, 2011 – Aflac Duck Gets Its Quack Back!

Using Coombs' SCCT, Table 5.2 provides a summary of how the media framed the organization's portrayal of this crisis event during the studied timeframe. It is important to note that 24% (*) of the studied articles reported on *both* the firing (*inform*) and the nationwide casting call (*bolster*). Another 20% were not categorized as these were more focused on the challenges of social media, the company's next steps, or speculation about Gottfried.

Table 5.2: Identified SCCT Crisis Response Strategies Used by Aflac

SCCT Strategy Applied	*# of media articles which denote company strategy*	*% of media articles which denote company strategy*
Deny/Scapegoat	0	0%
Diminish	0	0%
Inform	49*	56%
Rebuild/Compensation or Bolstering	38*	44%

Proactive versus reactive crisis response (R1f). The Aflac crisis was managed by the organization in a highly proactive manner. As previously noted, Aflac chose to "get ahead" of the Gottfried tweets by responding before any other key publics had a chance to do so. The company then engaged in a proactive marketing campaign to search for a new voice of their iconic duck.

As Aflac's CMO noted in his video interview with *Forbes* (Noer, 2011), companies facing a crisis "need to act swiftly and almost with shock and awe. Make a decision and stand by it." Zuna further offered the following advice: "Don't forget you are in control of the situation and your brand at that point in time, and you have the opportunity to control the crisis in a manner that you think best represents the brand." In a detailed nine-week timeline (see Figure 5.1), Aflac's proactive management of this crisis event is fully noted. It also outlines the number of media articles that were triggered by each of Aflac's formal communication notifications.

Understanding the Role of Social Media

Organization's online presence prior to the crisis (R2a). Aflac had/has a very robust presence on the Internet and in social media. The company has a global web site: www.aflac.com. On its web site, the organization prominently features its "social media" section (http://www.aflac.com/aboutaflac/social_media/social_media.aspx) in order to let site visitors know how to engage with the Aflac duck via Facebook or Twitter: www.facebook.com/aflacduck and www.twitter.com/aflacduck. At the time of the crisis, the Aflac duck had 236,000 fans (Nudd, *Adfreak,* March 23, 2011). The company also reports on its web site that Aflac's President uses Twitter www.twitter.com/pamos_19 to "offer his perspectives on leadership, life and insurance, and engage in conversations with the people that make Aflac one of the world's most ethical companies."

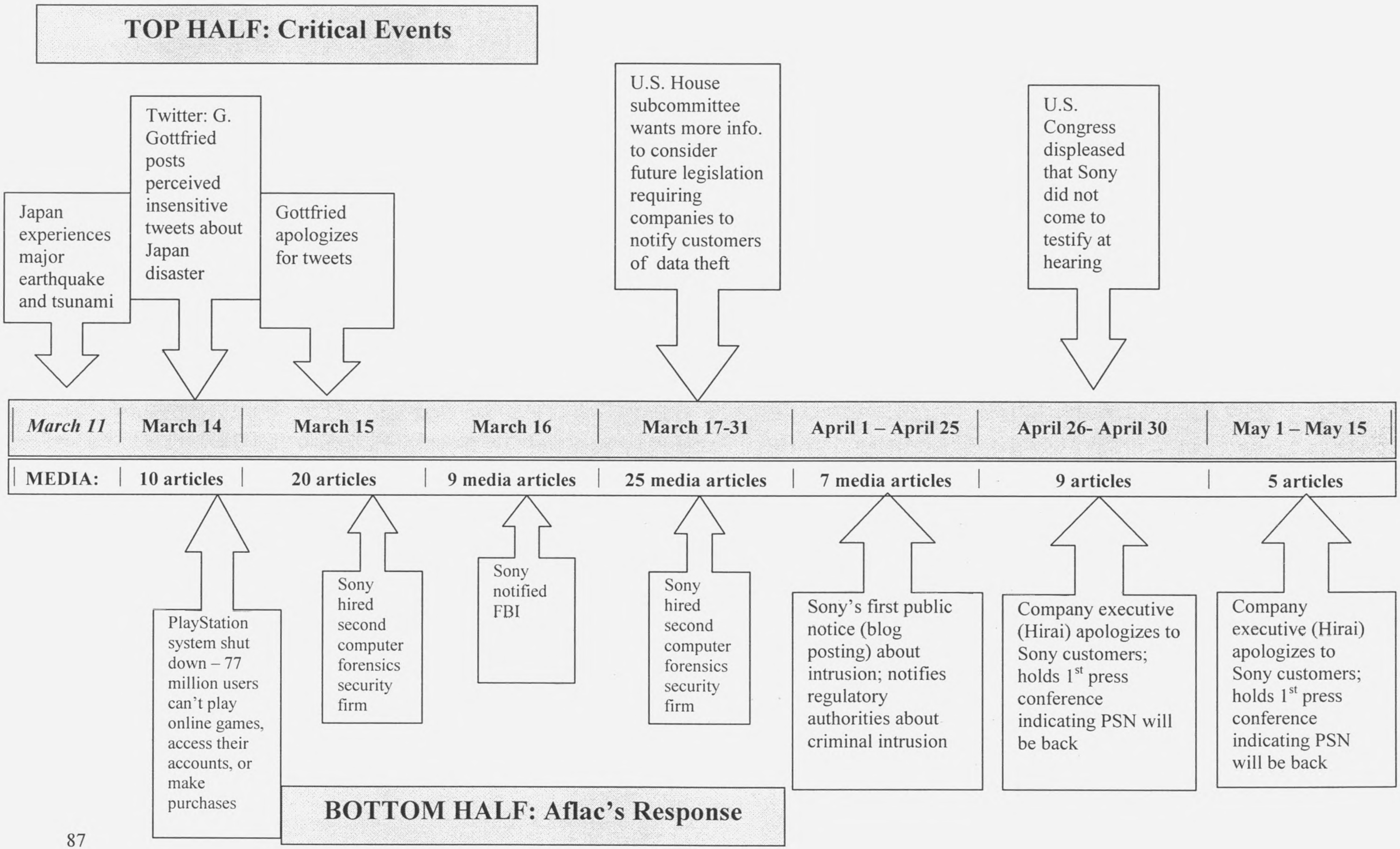
As Aflac's CMO noted in his video interview with *Forbes* (Noer, 2011), companies facing a crisis "need to act swiftly and almost with shock and awe. Make a decision and stand by it." Zuna further offered the following advice: "Don't forget you are in control of the situation and your brand at that point in time, and you have the opportunity to control the crisis in a manner that you think best represents the brand." In a detailed nine-week timeline (see Figure 5.1), Aflac's proactive management of this crisis event is fully noted. It also outlines the number of media articles that were triggered by each of Aflac's formal communication notifications.

Understanding the Role of Social Media

Organization's online presence prior to the crisis (R2a). Aflac had/has a very robust presence on the Internet and in social media. The company has a global web site: www.aflac.com. On its web site, the organization prominently features its "social media" section (http://www.aflac.com/aboutaflac/social_media/social_media.aspx) in order to let site visitors know how to engage with the Aflac duck via Facebook or Twitter: www.facebook.com/aflacduck and www.twitter.com/aflacduck. At the time of the crisis, the Aflac duck had 236,000 fans (Nudd, *Adfreak,* March 23, 2011). The company also reports on its web site that Aflac's President uses Twitter www.twitter.com/pamos_19 to "offer his perspectives on leadership, life and insurance, and engage in conversations with the people that make Aflac one of the world's most ethical companies."

Social media's role in the crisis (R1b and R2b). As previously noted, this crisis was initiated by Gottfried's tweets about the March 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami. Although the crisis originated on social media, in many ways social media played an

Figure 5.1: Aflac Crisis Timeline



Gottfried, Aflac's CMO noted that he came home to several messages from people offering their services as the new duck. He then realized that the company had a "really unique opportunity," so he gathered key members from his marketing staff and the company's agencies to "take advantage of America's talent with the phenomenon of reality TV and reality shows and see 'could we do the same?' … to turn this into a positive for us" (Zuna as quoted in Noer, 2011). As an aside, this recollection of events seems to be in conflict with his previously noted comment that "from the time he was informed about the tweets to the time the company acted upon it was under an hour." After all, the first press release issued by Aflac announcing Gottfried's firing noted the company would "immediately set plans in motion to conduct a nationwide casting call to find a new voice of the iconic Aflac duck." If this press release went out before Zuna came home that evening to hear these messages, it is unclear how this impromptu late night vision was possible. Otherwise, the press release must have been issued the next day, and not within an hour.

Aflac's subsequent nationwide talent search was conducted through Facebook, Twitter, and the career web site, Monster.com. The company utilized an old television commercial featuring the duck and did a take-off on silent movies and used it as a platform for its campaign.

> This was a real job … we were very focused on taking advantage of a situation to do this in a very modern and innovative way yet at the same time, we were very concerned about getting back into market as soon as possible. Where better to use the internet to do that and get your message out with scale? (Zuna as quoted in Noer, 2011)

Interestingly, the Aflac duck never mentioned Gottfried by name on its Twitter posts – perhaps because Twitter was the source of the crisis. Here are some examples of the Facebook and/or Twitter comments posted by Aflac's duck during the crisis event:

- *Facebook, May 9, 2011* – "I've been so busy with finding a new voice that I haven't seen my friends. Will you post pics of my duck friends you see?" (74 people "liked this");
- *Facebook, April 6, 2011* – "The search for a new duck voice has kept me busy, but the situation in Japan is still weighing heavy on my mind. If you haven't already done so, please consider making a donation to the Red Cross disaster relief fund" (121 people "liked this");
- *Facebook, April 2, 2011* – "Holy feathers, Batman – over 11,000 of you submitted applications to be my new voice! It's going to be a long weekend reviewing applications, but it's worth it. I'm dying to get my voice back." (286 people "liked this");
- *Twitter, March 24, 2011* – "I've got millions of thoughts but only one voice to give out. Could you be my new voice? Find out how to apply at http://aflac.com/monster;"
- *Twitter, March 15, 2011* – "Love that you want to be my new voice. But first I'm using it to ask for donations to the Red Cross for Japan. www.redcross.org/donate;" and
- *Facebook, March 15, 2011* – "Gilbert Gottffried's insensitive comments about the tragedy in Japan have left me speechless but not for long." Linked to first company press release. (341 people "liked this" and 195 posted comments).

With regard to the posting above, the 195 comments reflected a mixed sentiment on Aflac's decision. Some responses included:

- *Brian Beroldi, March 26, 2011* – "Please boycott Aflac for violating the first amendment;"
- *Patrick Bryant, March 27, 2011* – "BRING BACK Gilbert Gottfried!!!! THE DUCK WILL FAIL WITHOUT;" and
- *Keacha Bradley, April 1, 2011* – "I say good job. Japan is a major market for Aflac. It was heartless and uncalled for. People can say what they want, but it doesn't make it right or funny."

Still, the search campaign was deemed a success by Aflac and others in the media, with 12,500 applicants wanting to be the new voice of the duck (*The Calgary Herald,* April 27, 2011). As CMO Zuna noted, the company "selected entry 5184 – Dan McKeague – out of Hugo, Minnesota." He added, "He's a terrific guy … and we're very proud to have him represent us" (as quoted in Noer, 2011). Aflac strategically announced its selection via a press release, Facebook, and Twitter posts from the iconic duck, and through a YouTube video (2011, April 26).

Comments regarding the organization's leadership (R2e). There was minimal mention of the CEO or company's senior leadership within the studied media articles or on social media (Facebook and Twitter). On Facebook, some fans were disappointed or disagreed with Gottfried's firing, and one fan blamed CMO Zuna by name (Ronald James Ellis, April 2, 2011). Although the CMO's media statement about Gottfried's tweet appeared in 25% of the articles, only two of the 85 articles studied referenced Aflac's CEO in the headline; and even in these cases, the comments were more focused on the financial impact of the tsunami rather than the issue regarding the Gottfried tweets or the Aflac duck.

Comments regarding the organization's brand (R2f). Aflac prides itself in being recognized by the Ethisphere Institute as one of the world's most ethical companies (March 16, 2011). In the company's press release promoting its fifth consecutive year on the Ethisphere list, Aflac's Chairman and CEO commented, "Honesty, integrity and transparency are long-held values" of the Aflac brand. Aflac's management of this crisis reflected its brand values; but it is the iconic duck, not the CEO, who is the voice of that brand. In fact, the Aflac duck regularly posts comments on Facebook and Twitter, and it is the Aflac duck that is featured prominently in the company's television commercials and other marketing campaigns.

Aflac recognized that it had a unique opportunity to secure a "new voice" for its brand, but the duck itself needed to maintain the same degree of integrity. In the company's March 24, 2011 press release, CMO Zuna called the job opening "the best job available in America today," but he also explained:

> Being the new voice of the Aflac Duck carries responsibilities far beyond recording duck sounds. The Aflac Duck symbolizes our promise to be there in times of need. It represents the philanthropy and the ethical values embraced by our employees and more than 72,000 independent sales agents across the nation, so we are looking for the best person to help advance our brand and business in a way that demonstrates our values.

The media echoed much of the same sentiment regarding the organization's attempt to protect its long-standing and reputable brand:

- "Aflac decided to try to create some positive publicity after the incident by conducting a nationwide audition to find Mr. Gottfried's successor … Aflac executives emphasized that the winner would have to be a worthy representative of the company's values in addition to being an effective voice-over actor" (Elliott, *The New York Times*, April 27, 2011);
- "The brand is steering clear of anyone who might be remotely edgy … the new voice talent must align with Aflac's image as philanthropic with high ethical standard" (Wasserman, *Mashable*, March 23, 2011); and
- "The difference here is that Gottfried is associated with a corporation and involved in part of the millions they spend on creating an image" (Gandelman, *The Moderate Voice blog*, March 14, 2011).

In this case, the Aflac brand name was mentioned in less than half (48%) of the studied articles' headlines. Also of note (see Table 5.3), over 25% specifically mentioned social media or Twitter in the headline, and 36% referenced Gottfried in the headline. Therefore, a majority (61%) of the studied articles referenced Gottfried and/or social media in the "crisis" headline as compared to 48% using the organization's name.

Table 5.3: Media Headlines for Aflac Crisis March 14 – May 15, 2011

% Referenced Brand in Headline	% Referenced Social Media in Headline	% Referenced Gottfried in Headline
48%	26%	36%

Table 5.4 offers another perspective on how the print and online media covered this particular crisis event. This table identifies the percentage of articles coded by the researcher as either "positive," "negative," or "neutral" in overall tone. An example of a positive article would be when the article is upbeat and features positive comments about

the brand such as "Aflac has handled the difficult situation pretty well, i.e. with some humor as well as contrition" (Nudd, *Adfreak*, March 23, 2011). Table 5.4 also captures the percentage of articles, per media type, that were particularly critical of Gilbert Gottfried's jokes/tweets. Of note, an overwhelming 98% of the articles were coded either positive or neutral in tone, and, interestingly, the public relations media were the only media that were not critical of Gottfried's tweets.

Table 5.4: Media Coverage of Aflac Crisis

Aflac Media	Total Articles Reviewed	Percent Positive Tone	Percent Neutral Tone	Percent Negative Tone	Percent Critical of Gottfried
Business Media(U.S.)	11	27%	73%	N/A	18%
PR/Tech Media	9	22%	67%	11%	N/A
Consumer Media	49	2%	96%	2%	27%
Global Media	16	19%	81%	N/A	25%
TOTAL	**85**	**11%**	**87%**	**2%**	**22%**

As for Aflac's social media fans or followers, some of the public's postings have already been noted. Still, there were those that specifically referenced the brand. These too were mixed in sentiment:

- *Carey Henshaw Cannon, March 15, 2011* – "I say 'good riddance' even without the off-color comments about Japan. He just doesn't fit the Aflac image. I could see Jeff Foxworthy fitting the 'bill';"
- *Rob Tolf, March 16, 2011* – "No one could be as good a voice as Gilbert, this was a mistake Aflac;" and

- *Steven Lowell, March 22, 2011* – "Hey, good luck with the search, and completely respect your company turning this into a positive outlet to help others."

Post-crisis event online communications practices (R2g).

Aflac continues to utilize its web site and social media channels as ongoing communication vehicles to reach key publics – including the company's customers and social media "fans." As of April, 2012, the Aflac duck currently has over 313,000 followers on Facebook and over 14,500 followers on Twitter. On average, the Aflac duck posts at least once a day and sometimes will post as often as seven times per day. It should be noted that when reviewing post-crisis Twitter posts (September, 2011), there was some evidence that the ghost writer for the Aflac duck read the comments posted and has responded "thanks for helping to spread the word" with some of his followers.

Use of two-way communication with key publics (R2c and R2d): For the studied timeframe, this research found no evidence of two-way symmetrical communication between Aflac and its key publics. Certainly, Aflac engaged key publics in a strategic way in order to generate a conversation about the brand. But the company was on a mission to "create a buzz," and it neither appeared to react to Gottfried's immediate apology nor publicly acknowledged any of the "in defense of Gottfried" comments from his fellow comedians such as Howard Stern, Joan Rivers, or Whoopi Goldberg (William-Ross, *LAist,* March 15, 2011 and *TVSquad*, March 15, 2011).

Understanding the Global Perspective

Organization's global crisis approach: Ethnocentric, polycentric, hybrid approaches (R3a and R3b). In a review of the organization's web site, Facebook page, and blog, there is no clear evidence that Aflac managed or communicated about this issue any differently in other countries. However, it should be noted once again that Gottfried was not the voice of the duck in Japan.

Still, interestingly, there were two nearly identical articles released by the same author on the same day (Ken Belson, April 16, 2011), yet one published in a United States based newspaper (*The New York Times)* and the other in a global media outlet (*The International Herald Tribune)*. Although both articles were approximately 1100 words in length and the narrative was 95% the same (discussing how Aflac's management of the crisis followed a Japanese cultural approach), there were two stark differences – the article headline and a paragraph about Gilbert Gottfried. *The International Herald Tribune's* version was entitled, "U.S. insurer takes a Japanese approach after disaster; Steps Aflac has taken reflect country's call for sacrifice and humility." This article noted how, after the tragedy in Japan, Aflac had both purchased newspaper ads expressing messages of condolence to the earthquake and tsunami victims, and given its customers a six-month grace period to pay owed insurance premiums. The article was overwhelmingly positive in its description of Aflac's management of this tragic event. Conversely, the *The New York Times* article's headline was, "After the disasters in Japan, a stoic response from Aflac." Again, it was the same author and included most of the same content as the Tribune's, but, in this version, there was a paragraph noting how "not everyone involved with Aflac has been as sensitive." The author noted how Gottfried's jokes about the disaster "were not widely reported in Japan," although the company fired Gottfried, citing a morals clause, even though he had issued a public apology (para. 19). One cannot draw concrete conclusions about the differences between these two versions, but it is worth noting that the country origin of the media outlet can influence the writing style or approach.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the media was fairly complimentary of Aflac's management of this particular crisis issue. As noted, 98% reported on the matter in either a neutral or positive tone, and a public relations association leader commended Aflac on taking "expedient and decisive measures." Additionally, others have congratulated Aflac for being able to "quack the social media code" (Bauer, March 30, 2011), and advanced sentiments such as, "It's a remarkable tale of crisis management – probably the best I have heard in my entire career" (Noer, *Forbes*, June 6, 2011). It should also be noted that, although they did not win, Aflac was in 2012 named a finalist in *PRWeek's* Annual Awards for "Crisis or Issues Management Campaign of the Year" (*PRWeek*, 2012). Still, Aflac had its share of dissenters, especially those who revealed that Gottfried had a previous history as an offensive comedian; and, on social media, many members of the general public also came to his defense.

From a communications standpoint, Aflac's leadership and public relations staff adhered to several of the research-based crisis management best practices previously noted in this thesis. For example, this research found:

- Aflac reacted quickly to the crisis. It appreciated the speed of the viral environment and decided to get ahead of the issue, framing the situation in a way that was able to protect the company's long-standing brand;

- Aflac's senior management played a key role as crisis spokespersons, particularly the chief marketing officer and the company's head of corporate communications; and
- Aflac kept its key publics such as the media and its global customers informed through a wide variety of communication channels.

Still, even though Aflac may be ahead of many other organizations in its use of social media as a proactive and reactive communication vehicle, there is no evidence that the company has embraced Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication model. Further, the crisis appears to have been managed in the same manner (ethnocentric approach) for all affected global publics.

Finally, with regard to Coombs' SCCT, Coombs never advocated for an "inform/rebuild" strategy. In fact, this case is so unique in how it came about and in how it was managed that Coombs' theory does not seem relevant or applicable. A review of Coombs' crisis theory and its applicability to current crisis events will be discussed in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6: Discussion, Limitations, and Conclusion

This research sought to better understand how international organizations are managing crisis situations within today's global and viral media environment. By studying two specific crisis cases, the findings noted in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 revealed many differences in crisis management, despite the fact that both crises initiated from sources beyond the organization's immediate control. This chapter compares these two cases and examines various outcomes resulting from these crisis events. Then, using the insights gleaned from both crises, this chapter explores whether or not primary theoretical frameworks such as Coombs SCCT and Grunig's "excellence" model help to inform actual public relations practice for organizations facing real-time crisis issues. Finally, this chapter offers best practices for implementing a global crisis communication strategy using social media and discusses global implications for the public relations field, including considerations for future research.

Comparative Analysis

By examining crisis communication from a triangulated perspective – the organization, the media (traditional print and online), and other key publics (including the organization's customers) – this research addressed three key concerns:

- RQ1: How have specific contemporary international organizations handled crisis events?
- RQ2: What role did emerging media play in these organizational crisis events?
- RQ3: Did these contemporary organizations demonstrate a global perspective in handling crisis events?

For the two international organizations selected for this research, the findings revealed several different practices in crisis management (RQ1) and in the companies' uses of emerging/social media during the crisis events (RQ2). In the Sony PlayStation case, the organization appeared unprepared or caught off-guard by this crisis issue, even though it faced a similar issue previously and company executives were well aware that the organization was a favorite target for outside hackers. Aflac, on the other hand, presented itself in a "take charge" manner, ensuring that the company and not other key publics would frame and control the crisis conversation. Additionally, although Sony fluctuated in its crisis response strategies (something that Coombs' SCCT does not recommend), the real issue – the reason the crisis escalated – was that Sony failed to respond in a timely manner. Although the company executives disagreed with the timeliness argument, this research revealed ample evidence that both the media and Sony PSN customers became more frustrated as time passed without comment from Sony. As a result of differences in crisis management approach, the outcomes in media coverage and online conversations among key global publics were also quite different.

With regard to the organizations' uses of new or social media, both Sony PlayStation and Aflac had a strong web and social media presence prior to their respective crisis events. However, only Aflac took advantage of online communication channels to help effectively manage its crisis issue and maintain its strong brand. In fact, Aflac immediately began to use social media proactively in order to move the conversation into a different direction – "who wants to be the new voice of our brand?" It seems logical to conclude that Aflac was successful in part because it was guided by a corporate communications team that was *alert* to online conversations, and the team was *empowered* to respond quickly and effectively. Sony PSN on the other hand, let other key publics control the messages of its powerful brand, leaving many to question Sony's security practices and regard for its customers.

Finally, this research explored whether these organizations demonstrated a global perspective in the company's crisis management (RQ3). Interestingly, the two companies have shared geographic interests as Sony PlayStation has its corporate headquarters located in Japan, and Aflac has a division named "Aflac Japan" as 75% of its revenue share comes from the Japanese market. Still, although the findings indicate that both organizations recognize their global customers through dedicated web sites and social networks (for the countries where the company has international interests), each took an ethnographic approach with respect to crisis management practices. It should be noted, however, that in the Sony PlayStation case, since the data breach took place in the United States, the company did offer affected customers identity theft protection.

It would be unfair to compare these two crisis events in terms of severity. Certainly, a cyber attack impacting 77 million customers is more serious and potentially difficult to manage than one person's posting on a Twitter account. Still, regardless of the severity of the issue, both crises had the potential to incur long-term damage to the organizations' reputations or brands. Organizational crises do not occur in a vacuum, as one event has the ability to trigger another. For instance, Sony's crisis had a dual effect – it both exposed the company as being vulnerable to outside hackers and left 77 million customers wondering if their identity would be stolen. This then led members of Congress to question whether legislation was needed to better protect consumers by quickly notifying them when personal data has been stolen. Such legislation would have long-term implications for the industry and for businesses everywhere.

Ultimately, the variance in the crisis management resulted in different outcomes. In its reporting of a fourth consecutive year of net losses, Sony indicated that 10% of its PSN customers no longer use the service, and the CEO at the helm during the crisis was asked to step down (Benedetti, 2011 and Waugh, 2012). Table 6.1 summarizes the variances in approach and Table 6.2 provides specific distinctions in outcomes.

Table 6.1: Comparing Crisis Management Practices

Event	Sony PlayStation	Aflac
Crisis Issue	Cyber attack from external agent	Paid contractor posted jokes on personal Twitter account
Crisis Management Style	Reactive	Proactive
Organization Response Time	A few days	A few hours
Organization Announcements	Issued 5 press releases (all issued two weeks after crisis occurred)	Issued 4 press releases (first one within 24 hours/announced crisis event)
Use of Company Spokespersons	Limited use	Strategically used spokespersons to communicate messages broadly
Social Media Usage During Crisis	Minimal use	Extensive use
Coombs' SCCT Strategy Applied	Deny-Scapegoat/ Rebuild	Inform/Rebuild
Two-way symmetrical communication	No evidence	No evidence

Table 6.2: Comparing Crisis Management Outcomes

Sony PlayStation	Aflac
Brand name in 87% of crisis headlines	Brand name in 48% of crisis headlines
52% of print/online articles negative in tone	2% of print/online articles negative in tone
Company CEO fired one year later; 10% of customers no longer use service	Brand recognized by PR industry as finalist for best crisis campaign of the year

Analysis of crisis frameworks. In reviewing these cases from the perspective of Coombs' SCCT and Grunig's two-way symmetrical communication model, neither organization appeared to adhere to these highly regarded best practices in crisis communication. However, after spending extensive time reviewing these cases from the lens of both research-based theories, I submit that neither is fully practical or absolutely necessary. First let me clarify that I am not defending the steps or actions taken by either organization. But, as I studied both cases, I tried to envision myself on Sony's or Aflac's corporate communications team and pondered how I, as a trained and experienced communication professional, might have managed either crisis event. Furthermore, I questioned how applicable these specific crisis frameworks are in today's highly viral and global environment.

Between the case studies noted in the literature review and the two cases analyzed in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, it should be evident that the dynamics of any crisis event have changed greatly due to the emergence of online and social media. Therefore, the management of these issues must change too. Even Coombs acknowledged:

> A crisis management plan (CMP) is a reference tool, not a blueprint. A CMP provides lists of key contact information, reminders of what typically should be done in a crisis, and forms to be used to document the crisis response. A CMP is not a step-by-step guide to how to manage a crisis. (2007, October 30)

In my opinion, the same could be said for the SCCT, which can be confusing to follow but more importantly does not adequately address all potential crisis issues – especially in the Aflac case. This crisis issue does not fit any of the SCCT'S four *victim* categories because Gottfried was a paid contractor and therefore not an external agent of the company. Nor was this case *accidental* or even *preventable* (where the organization "knowingly placed people at risk"). Since this crisis is closest to the *victim* cluster, the SCCT recommends that crisis managers utilize either instructing information alone or a *deny* crisis response strategy. But Aflac did not "deny" or even try to "diminish" as it never claimed lack of control over the event. Rather, the company employed a strategy that would equate to Coombs' inform/rebuild approach. Yet according to Coombs (2007), the rebuild strategy is not always the preferred response; the more accommodative the strategy, the more expensive it is for the organization (p. 172). That is not likely to be true in Aflac's case because Aflac utilized social media as the primary communication vehicle.

Before moving on to the next theory, I would take one moment to further offer why Coombs' SCCT was confusing to follow. First, there are too many crisis strategy options that seemingly overlap yet actually vary when previous organizational history is considered. Also, the naming and definitions of the crisis response strategies is important. In common definitions of the words "*Deny/Scapegoat"* and "*Diminish/Excuse*," one might expect the strategies to be similar. Yet with the former, the crisis manager blames some person or group outside the organization for the crisis; and with the latter, the crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by *denying* intent to do harm. The use of the word "deny" in two separate and distinct crisis strategies may confuse practitioners and prohibit the critical application of Coombs' model in real crisis cases.

With respect to Grunig's et al. (1992) "excellence" theory, there was no evidence of either company engaging in two-way symmetrical communication before, during, or after the crisis event. But is this even necessary? Grunig has argued that public relations professionals with the expertise, strategic insight, and propensity toward two-way symmetrical communication will ultimately build stronger relationships and reputational assets with key publics. And if excellence in public relations is measured by the quality of relationships that an organization builds with its key publics, then social media can better enable the ideal of two-way communication because key publics can absorb and respond to communications in a comfortable environment (Schultz, Utz, & Goritz, 2010). Grunig, however, has not simply advocated for two-way dialogue. He and his colleagues are advocating for two-way symmetrical communication where the public and organizational interests are balanced – "a give-and-take relationship" – particularly in times of crisis (Hagan, 2007, p. 422). Sony and Aflac were likely concerned about their key publics. But if Sony had truly regarded its customers' interests, then it would have informed its customers of the breach – and potential identity theft – much sooner. Even in Aflac's case, the company recognized an opportunity to further promote the brand through free media coverage, and it took advantage of it. Considering Aflac's generally positive outcome, it would be difficult to argue for the ideal of two-way symmetrical communication when an approach of simply engaging in timely and open communication achieved positive results for the organization and its publics.

Finally, it is important to discuss the media's framing of these two crisis issues. For one, in the Aflac case, the media followed the company's lead. It reported on the issue using the same language as provided in the company's press releases, and it helped to provide free promotion for the company's campaign to find its new voice. However, in the Sony case, for nearly two weeks the media was left to speculate about what was going on and why the PSN service had yet to be restored. Sony's silence allowed the media to frame the crisis, which resulted in a majority of articles (52%) being negative in tone (as compared to 2% for Aflac). One further note is the sometimes distinct and subtle differences in the portrayal of crisis events by U.S.-based media versus media in other countries. This research identified a few instances of these varying reporting styles and, considering the global implications to a brand, additional research examining these differences should be explored.

Implications for Public Relations in an Online, Global World

Crisis communication has been the core of public relations theory and practice for decades (Grunig et al.,1992; Falkheimer & Heide, 2006). Curtin & Gaither (2007) argued, "Savvy consultants know they can rely on their professional experience, but they must also be open and adaptable to that which is foreign to them" (p. 258). It has been common practice for public relations to play a critical role in developing crisis messages and in preparing company spokespersons to handle questions from the news media. In fact, the media relations element of public relations has been a highly valued skill in crisis management (Coombs, 2007, October 30). But communication needs to be a reciprocal process that better enables mutual understanding between an organization and its key publics (Falkheimer & Heide, 2006, p. 187). In order for this industry to remain relevant and instrumental in crisis management, practitioners cannot be surprised or unresponsive to negative comments posted on social media. If they are truly protectors of an organization's brand, then they must fully engage in social media and ensure that their organization's leaders are knowledgeable of the risks and that are prepared to respond quickly.

The most dramatic outcome of emerging media and globalization is that the speed and reach of communication has forever changed. Consequently, organizations are more vulnerable to crisis issues that can blossom in a digital environment and are subjected to an accelerated news cycle (i.e., 24 hour cable news and a variety of online social networks). Still, as public relations professionals consider ways to address today's challenges, it should be noted that most communication experts are not advocating for major departures from traditional crisis plans. For instance, a review of recommendations offered before and after the emergence of social media shows that most crisis experts still advocated that an organization's crisis plan should:

- Identify and prepare for a wide range of potential crisis situations;
- Identify and properly train a crisis response team. The team should meet regularly and should include representatives from management, legal, human resources, finance, and communications;
- Consider and provide a cost analysis for what might be legally mandated (e.g. identity theft protection); and
- Stage crisis readiness simulations (Scudder, 2012).

What has changed is that now we need to consider how to update these plans in order to effectively integrate social media to support and enhance an organization's communication efforts (Semple, 2009; Borremans, 2010). Likewise, the challenges of international crisis communication must also be addressed (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). In fact, Coombs (2012) has supported the argument presented by others (Curtin & Gaither, 2007) by stating that "crisis managers must resist the temptation to apply ethnocentric crisis communication solutions" (p. 723). Again, if public relations professionals desire to remain relevant in this complex world, it is necessary to accept and adapt to change. As Coombs (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) noted, culture is a distinct factor that can alter stakeholder perceptions and reactions; therefore it is essential for communication professionals to understand how various cultural factors impact the crisis communication process and its outcomes (pp. 722-723).

Certainly, the crisis communication frameworks that have been discussed throughout this thesis are still useful in preparation for crisis events; however, more research is needed. Coombs (2012) has acknowledged the need for further testing of the SCCT as only a small percentage of its crisis recommendations have been tested to date (p. 722). And Curtin & Gaither (2007) cautioned that current research has served to mainly identify challenges to international public relations rather than extending theory or discussing effective practices (p. 19). Of course, this has not and should not prevent other communication experts from offering advice to modern day practitioners striving to address the challenges of emerging global and viral communications. In fact, many of these experts have the benefit of a recent crisis experience, and now understand that some of the same tools that trigger a crisis can also aid in resolving it. The following are examples of newly recommended best practices for crisis planning:

- Conduct research to have a greater understanding of an organization's key publics. This includes daily monitoring of all that is being said about the organization (Borremans, 2010). There are many online tools (e.g. search engine optimization) that enable such monitoring; and this critical information will help to better guide and inform decisions made by the organization during a crisis;

- Understand the new media tools that are available today and actively engage – even if this means engaging personally before doing so professionally. Next, start building the organizations' online communities through two-way communication (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Semple, 2009);
- Create "dark sites" – a hidden web site with pertinent information that can easily be turned on during a crisis (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008; Borremans, 2010);
- Use the organization's intranet site to create an online crisis manual which is easier to update and can enable quicker communication activities to internal and external stakeholders, including the media (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008);
- Recalibrate your organization's response time and level of transparency. Be prepared to respond to key publics in the moment and be prepared to manage negative comments and "respond to questions with grace" (PR Newswire, 2011, p. 8); and
- Consider your global audiences. Understand how different cultures will perceive certain actions taken by the organization (Borremans, 2010).

For some organizations that are more comfortable with controlling messages and engaging in "one-way" communication, these steps may be a significant departure from previous practices. However, it is the public relations professional's responsibility to guide an organization toward these best practices by demonstrating how building relationships with key publics can both establish credibility and help to contain or even prevent a crisis (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). Be prepared to provide specific examples of organizations that failed to appreciate the power of social media and, in turn, suffered through negative media coverage throughout the world. Conversely, the Aflac crisis case should serve as a model for how a corporate communications team functioned as strategic partners to the company's senior management, and how this team effectively guided the organization through an online crisis issue. Lastly, it has become increasingly important to demonstrate to senior management how the organization's current employees are already actively engaging in social networks and are frequently expressing opinions about their employer on YouTube or among their circle of "friends." Rather than viewing this as a major concern or a loss of productivity, savvy organizations are recognizing that employees can serve as a company's best brand advocates – especially in an online environment.

Research Limitations

This research sought to examine the role of emerging media in global crisis communications. However, case study research has clear limitations. First, this research only studied two specific cases that are not representative of all international brands. Further, in reviewing these cases, the researcher was the sole media coder, the media analyzed was not comprehensive, and the data sets did not include the companies' internal communications during the time of crisis. In fact, the narrative of both crisis events was externally focused as this research did not ascertain how the crisis was negotiated internally (i.e. what steps were recommended versus what actions were taken). This research also does not prove any causal relationship between online communication, crisis best practices, and global reputation. Still, by examining the crisis management actions taken by these organizations and the subsequent reaction from print and online media as well as other global publics, this thesis has revealed inconsistencies in overall crisis management and incongruence between public relations theory and practice.

Conclusion

President John F. Kennedy once said, "When written in Chinese, the word 'crisis' is composed of two characters. One represents danger and the other represents opportunity" (Brainy Quote). As conveyed throughout this thesis, today's organizational crises are taking place in a highly viral and increasingly global environment. It is therefore incumbent upon the organization and its public relations professionals to fully understand and appreciate the organizational risks and rewards. Through effective social media engagement, organizations have the ability to build relationships with key publics, and can anticipate or manage issues before they escalate to the crisis level. However, this research has shown that in order for the public relations profession to be viewed as an essential and strategic component of any organization, its practitioners need to accelerate their own understanding and comfort level with emerging media. Additionally, as the practice of international public relations is on the rise, the profession must engage in scholarly research on social media usage and its global implications on brand reputations – particularly in times of crisis.

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Appendix A – Sony PlayStation Media List

	Article Title	Media Source	Release Date
1	Holding companies accountable for privacy breaches	The New York Times Blogs	4/27/2011
2	Sony chief says PlayStation Network to return soon	The New York Times Blogs	5/5/2011
3	Sony begins phased restoration of PlayStation services	The New York Times Blogs	5/14/2011
3	Sony chief defends response to PlayStation data breach	The New York Times Blogs	5/17/2011 (a)
5	Congress asks Sony to address unanswered questions	The New York Times Blogs	5/17/2011 (b)
6	Sony and Epsilon agree to testify before Congress	The New York Times Blogs	5/28/2011
7	Hacker group claims responsibility for new Sony break-in	The New York Times Blogs	6/2/2011
8	Sony says PlayStation hacker got personal data	The New York Times	4/27/2011
9	PlayStation security breach a test of consumers' trust	The New York Times	4/28/2011
10	There's no data sheriff on the wild web	The New York Times	5/8/2011
11	Sony chief still in search of turnaround	The New York Times	5/27/2011
12	Hacker group claims responsibility for attack on Sony Pictures	The New York Times	6/3/2011
1	Comic: Sonys apology for PlayStation takes a surprising turn	Mashable	4/30/2011
2	User account information compromised in PlayStation Network attack	Mashable	4/26/2011
3	Sony to resume PlayStation Network services, Says no evidence credit card info stolen	Mashable	5/1/2011
4	Will PlayStation Network hackers strike again?	Mashable	5/6/2011
5	As Sony recovers, it faces challenges from hackers, customers & Congress	Mashable	5/6/2011
6	Infographic: Security fears skyrocketing in the U.S.	Mashable	5/7/2011
7	Sony misses deadline to restart PlayStation Network	Mashable	5/9/2011
8	10 tech PR disasters of the past decade	Mashable	5/12/2011
9	Amazon servers used in Sony PlayStation hack	Mashable	5/14/2011
10	Sony PlayStation Network fixes password security breach	Mashable	5/18/2011
11	PlayStation Network outage: The real costs	Mashable	5/22/2011

	Article Title	Media Source	Release Date
12	Sony PlayStation Network hack cost company $170 million so far	Mashable	5/26/2011
13	Sony promises all PlayStation services will return this week (again)	Mashable	5/31/2011
14	Leader it pays to be honest about thefts of data	Marketing Week	5/6/2011
15	Technology Sony comms under fire	PRWeek	5/5/2011
16	Reputation Survey Sony - Sony's reputation damaged by breach	PRWeek	5/13/2011
1	Sonys new version of PlayStation Home virtual world goes live Wednesday	VentureBeat	4/20/2011
2	Sony PlayStation Network suffers big outage	VentureBeat	4/21/2011
3	As PlayStation Network outage continues, hackers deny involvement	VentureBeat	4/22/2011
4	Week in review: PlayStation Networks big outage	VentureBeat	4/23/2011
5	Sony confirms external attack brought down PlayStation Network	VentureBeat	4/23/2011
6	Five days and counting: Sonys PlayStation Network outage continues	VentureBeat	4/25/2011
7	Will developers and gamers flock to other consoles as Sonys PlayStation Network remains down?	VentureBeat	4/26/2011
8	Surprise: Sony faces class action lawsuit on PlayStation Network breach	VentureBeat	4/27/2011
9	The cost of Sonys PlayStation Network outage: $24 billion or $20 million	VentureBeat	4/27/2011
10	Sony reassures PlayStation Network customers that their game data isn't lost	VentureBeat	4/29/2011
11	What Sony does next is critical to its future in games	VentureBeat	4/30/2011
12	Sony chief Howard Stringer apologizes to gamers for PSN outage	VentureBeat	5/5/2011
13	Sony in final stages of internal testing to bring PlayStation Network back online	VentureBeat	5/5/2011
14	Security expert: Sony used outdated software before PlayStation Network breach	VentureBeat	5/5/2011
15	Hackers plotting third attack against Sony after PlayStation Network outage	VentureBeat	5/6/2011
16	Sony's Playstation Network hack attack repair bill: $1.6 million or $1.25 billion	VentureBeat	5/7/2011
17	And we're back: Sony's PlayStation Network is now online in U.S. and Europe	VentureBeat	5/14/2011
18	Sony offers free games after bringing PlayStation Network back online	VentureBeat	5/16/2011
19	PlayStation Store to return May 24 now that PlayStation Network is back online	VentureBeat	5/19/2011

	Article Title	Media Source	Release Date
20	Sony hacked again, but this time not PlayStation Network	VentureBeat	5/20/2011
21	Sony's PlayStation Network outage costs $171M	VentureBeat	5/23/2011
22	Just how frustrated are PlayStation Network users over downtime?	VentureBeat	5/24/2011
23	Microsoft applies lessons from PlayStation Network downtime: don't hunt hackers	VentureBeat	5/28/2011
24	Week in review: How frustrated are PlayStation Networks users about downtime?	VentureBeat	5/28/2011
25	PBS NewsHour hackers turn eyes to Sony	VentureBeat	6/1/2011
26	PBS Hackers: we cracked Sony Pictures, compromised 1M accounts	VentureBeat	6/2/2011
1	Sony set for launch of iPad rival	Financial Times (Europe)	4/27/2011
2	Sony prepares to join tablet race	Financial Times (Asia)	4/27/2011
3	Sony loses face over theft of PS3 data	Financial Times (Asia)	4/28/2011
4	Sony faces anger over delays in revealing PlayStation data theft	Financial Times (London)	4/28/2011
5	Sony faces fire over hackers	Financial Times (London)	4/28/2011
6	Sony faces fury over hacked data delay	Financial Times (Asia)	4/28/2011
7	Sony users face long odds in hacking suits	Financial Times (Asia)	4/29/2011
8	Grand theft data	Financial Times (Asia)	4/30/2011
9	Storing too much information; Consumers should be more aware of internet data issues	Financial Times (Asia)	5/3/2011
10	Is Sony right to take its time to reveal security breaches?	Financial Times (London)	5/4/2011
11	Veteran hackers point finger over Sony incursion; PlayStation data breach	Financial Times (London)	5/7/2011
12	Banks wait to react to Sony fraud	Financial Times (London)	5/7/2011
13	Tough test for game chief to hit next level; news analysis	Financial Times (London)	5/7/2011
14	Sony hit by fresh security problems	Financial Times (London)	5/19/2011
15	Hackers continue to plague Sony	Financial Times (Asia)	5/26/2011
16	Spying rife as web adds to risks	Financial Times (London)	6/2/2011

	Article Title	Media Source	Release Date
17	United States massive data breach suspected in Sony PlayStation hacker attack	Thai Press Reports	4/28/2011
18	Pressure to quit builds on Sony's Stringer	The Daily Telegraph	5/4/2011
19	Sony closes gaming site after second security breach	New Zealand Herald	5/4/2011
20	The only hack-free zone is offline	Business Day (South Africa)	5/4/2011
21	PSP FIR	Indian Express	5/6/2011
22	Sony's Stringer finally issues security apology	Evening Standard	5/6/2011
23	Sony's Howard Stringer issues apology letter for network breach	The Business Insider	5/6/2011
24	Media a game that Sony must win - the hacking of Sony's PlayStation Network was blow to global giant	The Guardian	5/9/2011
25	Sony to offer $1M insurance policies to U.S. gamers impacted by massive cyber breach	BestWire	5/11/2011
26	Report: Sony Music Japan, Sony Ericsson hacked	CNET.com	5/24/2011
27	Sony tells Congress it acted promptly on data breach	The Phillipines News Agency	6/3/2011
28	Hackers break into Sony's security again	International Business Times News	6/3/2011
29	Will Sony address the elephant in the room at E3?	International Business Times News	6/3/2011
30	Under-fire Sony in New Data Breach by hackers	Irish Independent	6/4/2011

Business Media
PR/Trade Media
Global Media

Appendix B – Aflac Media List

	Article Title	Media Source	Release Date
1	When the marketing reach of social media backfires	The New York Times	3/15/2011
2	Tallying the financial aftermath: Japan government likely to bear big monetary loss	The New York Times	3/16/2011
3	Twitter? Mayor's gaffes come the old-fashioned way	The New York Times	3/18/2011
4	Corporate missteps in social media	The New York Times	3/24/11
5	A noisy casting call as thousands quack for Aflac	The New York Times	4/6/11
6	After the disasters in Japan, a stoic response from Aflac	The New York Times	4/16/11
7	When publicists says "shh!"	The New York Times	4/17/11
8	A new voice for the Aflac duck	The New York Times	4/27/11
9	Relieved by earnings, investors send shares up	The New York Times	4/29/11
10	Hertz uses mascot in effort to make rental cars cool	The New York Times	5/4/2011
11	Laughs and gaffes	The New York Times	5/15/2011
1	Aflac cans Gilbert Gottfried for Japan jokes	Adfreak	3/14/2011
2	Want to be the next voice of the Aflac duck?	Adfreak	3/23/2011
3	Auditions for Aflac duck not going that well	Adfreak	4/6/2011
4	Gilbert Gottfried fired over Japan jokes on Twitter	Mashable	3/15/2011
5	The 5 biggest stories in tech, business & media this morning	Mashable	3/15/2011
6	5 tips for maintaining brand consistency across social media	Mashable	3/22/2011
7	Aflac holding online casting call to replace Gilbert Gottfried	Mashable	3/23/2011
8	Aflac has found its new spokesduck	Mashable	4/26/2011
9	73 essential social media & tech resources for small businesses	Mashable	5/15/2011
1	Aflac fires duck voice guy over "bad taste" Japanese jokes	Benzinga	3/14/2011
2	Gilbert Gottfried loses Aflac duck gig because he thinks the Japan tsunami is hilarious	Consumerist	3/14/2011

	Article Title	Media Source	Release Date
3	Parting Tweet: Gilbert Gottfried gets fired for insensitive Japan comments	Crushable	3/14/2011
4	Aflac to Asshat: Gilbert Gottfried fired	EveryJoe	3/14/2011
5	Gilbert Gottfried dropped as Aflac duck after terrible tsunami jokes	Gawker	3/14/2011
6	Gilbert Gottfried fired by Aflac for Twitter jokes about Japan	The Moderate Voice	3/14/2011
7	Gilbert Gottfried fired as Aflac duck after insensitive Japan tweets	PopEater	3/14/2011
8	Gilbert Gottfried fired as (and apparently was) Aflac duck	The Wrap	3/14/2011
9	Gilbert Gottfried fired by Aflac for tsunami jokes on Twitter	Zennie62	3/14/2011
10	Aflac fires duck voice actor over tasteless tsunami tweets	Digital Journal	3/15/2011
11	Gilbert Gottfried fired as voice of Aflac duck over Japanese jokes	TV Squad	3/15/2011
12	Gilbert Gottfried apologizes for offensive Japan tweets	TV Squad	3/15/2011
13	Did Gilbert Gottfried go too far with his Japan jokes?	TV Squad	3/15/2011
14	Morning news report: March 15, 2011	Blogging with Bryan C. Hanks	3/15/2011
15	If it walks like a duck…	InsureBlog	3/15/2011
16	AFLAC fires Gilbert Gottfried (voice of duck) over tsunami jokes	EUR/Electronic Urban Report	3/15/2011
17	Is earthquake a sign from God that celebrities should STFU?	Gothamist	3/15/2011
18	Aflac boots Gottfried as duck voice	Huckleberries Online	3/15/2011
19	Gottfried got fired: Japan jokes cost funnyman pitch gig	LAist	3/15/2011
20	Aflac fires the guy who does the voice of its duck for making tasteless Japan jokes on Twitter	The Business Insider	3/15/2011
21	Aflac duck gets fired: "I want a new duck" (video)	The Medical Quack	3/15/2011
22	Gilbert Gottfried has culture after all, he toured Betsy Ross house	PhillyGossip (Philadelphia Daily News)	3/15/2011
23	8622: Aflac ducks from Gottfried's tweets	MultiCultClassics	3/15/2011
24	Japanese victims not shown sympathy	NEPartisan	3/15/2011
25	Offensive Gilbert Gottfried dumped by Aflac for offensive tsunami tweets	Deceiver.com	3/16/2011
26	Social media: You must draw the line before it can be crossed	The Adaptive Marketer	3/16/2011

	Article Title	Media Source	Release Date
27	The perils of Twitter	FierceCIO	3/16/2011
28	Gilbert Gottfried fired for tasteless tsunami jokes, apologizes	Say Anything	3/16/2011
29	The slippery slope of social media accountability	Marketing Tea Party	3/17/2011
30	Hey, Gilbert Gottfried: Offensive jokes about the Japan tsunami aren't healthy	Blisstree	3/18/2011
31	Bozell Column: Japan, just not funny	Newsbusters.org	3/19/2011
32	Bad-taste humor about Japan's natural disasters: Our shrink says "survivors only"	Blisstree	3/22/2011
33	8637: Quacking casting call	MultiCultClassics	3/22/2011
34	Are YOU the next voice of the Aflac duck?	The Business Insider	3/23/2011
35	Unusual job opportunity	Dollars and Sense	3/23/2011
36	Aflac CEO Dan Amos tells Fox Business he expects Tokyo "will be back within a month or…"	GuruFocu	3/23/2011
37	Casting search is on for unique new voice for Aflac duck	Digital Journal	3/24/2011
38	Gilbert Gottfried the latest person fired for tweets	WalletPop	3/24/2011
39	How's your duck voice? AFLAC!	The Fresno Bee Editorial Opinion Blog	3/25/2011
40	Gilbert Gottfried offends, and now Aflac needs you	Back Stage Blog Stage	3/31/2011
41	Aflac CEO: We are going to have quite a few claims in Japan	Wall St. Cheat Sheet	3/31/2011
42	Watch highlights from the Aflac duck audition	Back Stage Blog Stage	4/5/2011
43	Aflac duck finds his new voice	Back Stage Blog Stage	4/26/2011
44	Quick: Duck!	InsureBlog	4/26/2011
45	Aflac's new duck voice is a 36 year-old dad from Minnesota. He won the gig with an audition he snuck in as his workplace, radio station KQRS.	The Business Insider	4/26/2011
46	Worried about brand damage from social media? Get Tweet insurance	ReadWriteWeb	4/26/2011
47	Gilbert Gottfried faults media for turning his jokes into a firing offense	PopEater	4/29/2011
48	Gilbert Gottfried wishes he'd written his book after Aflac fired him	PopEater	5/11/2011
49	13 people who got fired for tweeting	The Business Insider	5/16/2011

	Article Title	Media Source	Release Date
1	Gilbert Gottfried fired after jokes about the earthquake, tsunami in Japan	International Business Times News	3/15/2011
2	Gilbert Gottfried apologizes for making jokes about earthquake, tsunami in Japan	International Business Times News	3/15/2011
3	Gottfried lays egg, loses Aflac job	Edmonton Journal (Alberta)	3/15/2011
4	Our vulgar, new digital world	Guelph Mercury (Ontario, Canada)	3/16/2011
5	Aflac severs ties with Gilbert Gottfried	Daily the Pak Banker	3/16/2011
6	"Family Guy" writer Alec Sulkin joins 50 Cent, Gottfried on the insensitive Japan quake tweet list	International Business Times News	3/16/2011
7	League star in probe over Japan jokes	The New Zealand Herald	3/17/2011
8	How a bad joke can go global; Speed of social media makes them a minefield for corporate advertisers	The International Herald Tribune	3/17/2011
9	Burned by social media's reach	The Hamilton Spectator (Ontario, Canada)	3/17/2011
10	Tweets, twits, bad timing	The Calgary Herald (Alberta)	3/18/2011
11	Aflac holds open call for new duck voice after firing	Waterloo Region Record	3/23/2011
12	Twitter's immediacy can lead to red-faced users feeling like twits	The Gazette (Montreal)	3/24/2011
13	A new voice to give the Aflac duck its quack back	Daily the Pak Banker	3/27/2011
14	Final call for Aflac duck voice online auditions	Daily the Pak Banker	4/4/2011
15	U.S. insurer takes a Japanese approach after disaster; Steps Aflac has taken reflect country's calls for sacrifice and humility	The International Herald Tribune	4/16/2011
16	Aflac's duck gets new voice	The Calgary Herald (Alberta)	4/27/2011

Business Media
PR/Trade Media (blogs)
Consumer Media (blogs)
Global Media

Appendix C: Content Analysis Coding Form

General:

*Name of Organization*__________________________________

Month/Year Crisis Event First Reported in Social or Traditional Media

____

Research Questions:

R1a: What type of crisis occurred? (select only one)

Victim/Natural Disaster
Accidental/Internal – process-related
Intentional/Preventable

R1b: Was the crisis incited by or did it emerge as a result of a social media comment or posting?

Yes (explain how)
No

R1c: *How quickly did the organization respond to the crisis event?*

Within 48 hours
3 or more days

R2a: What presence did the organization have in the online environment at the time of the crisis event? (Web pages, Facebook, Twitter, blog, etc.)?

Organization's Social Media General Usage (select all that apply)

Company blog
Facebook Fan Page
Twitter Page
Posts company videos online
Company Web site
Company Web site only

No online presence

R2b: Did the organization utilize social media proactively (get ahead of issue and inform
publics) or reactively (only responded when outside forces – government or traditional media – pushed a response)?

Organization Proactively Used <u>Social Media</u> (not just company web site) during Crisis Event (select all that apply)

Yes, Company blog (at least one)
Yes, Facebook Fan Page
Yes, Twitter Page
Yes, Posts company videos online
Yes, other (explain)
No

R2e: *Was the organization's leadership (i.e. CEO) negatively reviewed by traditional and/or online/social media during or after the crisis event?*

Yes (explain how)
No evidence

R2f: *Was the organization's brand negatively reviewed by traditional and/or online/social media during or after the crisis event?*

Yes (explain how)
No evidence

R2g: *After the crisis event, did the organization implement any changes to its online communication practices?*

Yes, created new social media sites
Yes, created new social media content or policies
No evidence of change

Appendix D: Textual Analysis Coding Form

General:

*Name of Organization*____________________________________

Research Questions:

R1d: *Which situational crisis response strategy (from Coombs' Theory) did the organization first adopt?*

Inform
Deny
Diminish
Rebuild

R1e: *At any time, did the organization change/move away from its initial crisis response strategy (from Coombs' Theory)?*

Yes, it changed once to ....(explain)
Yes, it changed more than once (explain)
Rebuild

R1f: *Did the organization handle the crisis proactively (get ahead of issue and inform publics) or reactively (only responded when outside forces – government or traditional media – pushed a response)?*

Yes, proactive issues management
No, only responded when external force (i.e. traditional media) covered issue

R2c: *During the crisis event, did the organization (and its public relations professionals) engage in two-way communication with key publics (per Grunig's Theory) in an online environment?*

Yes (explain how)
No evidence

R2d: *If "yes" to R2c, is there evidence to suggest that key public's behavior/attitudes were positively impacted by organization engaging in two-way communications?*

Yes (explain how)
No evidence

R3a: *Is there evidence to suggest that the organization handled the crisis event differently in other countries?*

No, but did offer various language translations (ethnocentric)
No evidence of varying/different communication practices (ethnocentric)
Yes, took very different approaches by country (polycentric)
Yes, a mixture of general and local PR principles (hybrid/mixed approach)

R3b: *If "yes" to R3a, is there evidence to suggest that local and global stakeholder's perceptions/attitudes were positively impacted by organization handling crisis event differently in other countries?*

Yes (explain how)
No evidence

Appendix E: Sony PlayStation® Network – Content Analysis

PRINT/ONLINE MEDIA COVERAGE: April 19 – June 3, 2011

Media Outlet	Total Articles Reviewed	Noted Company Used Social Media for Outreach	Company apology Noted	Response Time Challenged/ Criticized	Brand perception or financial impact was discussed	Includes negative comments about company	Includes negative comments about CEO/execs
	Business Media						
New York Times	5	1	1	3	2	4	2
NY Times Blog	7	1 (blog only)		4	1	2	1
Subtotal	*12*	*2*	*1*	*7*	*3*	*6*	*3*
	PR/Tech Media						
PR/Mktg Week	3	1		3	3 (survey)	2	
Mashable Blog	13	2 (blog)	2	2	5	3	
Subtotal	*16*	*3*	*2*	*5*	*8*	*5*	
	Global Media						
Financial Times	16		2	10	6	7	
Venture Beat Blog	26	6	4 (in May)*	7	12	12	1
Miscellaneous	14	1	5	7	5	6	2
Subtotal	*56*	*7*	*11*	*24*	*23*	*25*	*3*
TOTAL	**84**	**12**	**14**	**36**	**34**	**36**	**6**

Article Source: Lexis Nexus Search

Appendix E: Sony PlayStation® Network – Content Analysis (page 2)

Print/Online Media Perception – April 19-30, 2011

Media Outlet	Total Articles Reviewed	Overall Tone: Negative	Overall Tone: Neutral	Company's SCCT crisis response strategy	Brand perception or financial impact discussed	Includes negative customer quote	Company Spokesperson Apology is deemed insincere
	Business/Tech Media						
New York Times	2	1	1	1 scapegoat	1 (negative)	1	1
NY Times Blog	1		1				
Subtotal	*3*	*1*	*2*		*1*	*1*	*1*
	PR/Tech Media						
PR/Mktg Week	0						
Mashable Blog	2	1	1	1 inform		1 (Comic Strip)	
Subtotal	*2*	*1*	*1*			*1*	
	Global Media						
Financial Times	8	5	3	5 scapegoat	5	4	
Venture Beat Blog	11	3 (began 4/26)	8	4 scapegoat 3 inform	5		
Miscellaneous	1	1		1 scapegoat			
Subtotal	*20*	*9*	*11*		*10*	*4*	*0*
TOTAL	**25**	**11**	**14**	**11 deny/ 4 inform**	**11**	**6**	**1**

Appendix E: Sony PlayStation® Network – Content Analysis (page 3)

Print/Online Media Perception – May, 2011

Media Outlet	Total Articles Reviewed	Overall Tone: Negative	Overall Tone: Neutral	SCCT Crisis response strategy used	Brand perception or financial impact discussed	Includes negative customer quote	Company Spokesperson Apology is deemed insincere
	Business/Tech						
New York Times	2	2			1		
NY Times Blog	5	1	4	2 scapegoat 1 inform 1 rebuild			
Subtotal	*7*	*3*	*4*		*1*		
	PR/Tech Media						
PR/Mktg Week	3	2	1	1 scapegoat	3		
Mashable Blog	11	7	4	1 scapegoat 3 inform	5		
Subtotal	*14*	*9*	*5*		*8*		
	Global Media						
Financial Times	7	4	3		1		
Venture Beat Blog	13	6	7	3 scapegoat 3 inform 3 rebuild	7	4	
Miscellaneous	10	5	5	5 scapegoat 1 rebuild	4	1	1
Subtotal	*30*	*15*	*15*		*12*	*5*	*1*
TOTAL	**51**	**27**	**24**	**12 deny 6 inform 5 rebuild**	**21**	**5**	**1**

Appendix E: Sony PlayStation® Network – Content Analysis (page 4)

Print/Online Media Perception – June 1-3, 2011

Media Outlet	Total Articles Reviewed	Overall Tone: Negative	Overall Tone: Neutral	SCCT Crisis response strategy used	Brand perception or financial impact was discussed	Includes negative customer quote	Company Spokesperson Apology is deemed insincere
	Business/Tech Media						
New York Times	1	1					
NY Times Blog	1	1			1		
Subtotal	*2*	*2*			*1*		
	PR/Tech Media						
PR/Mktg Week	0						
Mashable Blog	0						
Subtotal	0						
	Global Media						
Financial Times	1		1				
Venture Beat Blog	2	2				1 (tweet from attacker)	
Miscellaneous	3	2	1	1 rebuild	1	2 (twitter comment from attacker and consultant)	
Subtotal	*6*	*4*	*2*		*1*	*3*	
TOTAL	**8**	**6**	**2**	**1 rebuild**	**2**	**3**	

Article Source: Lexis Nexus Search

Appendix F: Aflac® – Content Analysis

PRINT & ONLINE MEDIA COVERAGE: March 14 – May 15, 2011

Media Outlet	Total Articles Reviewed	Noted Company Used Social Media for Outreach	Company apology Noted	Response Time challenged versus praised	Brand perception or financial impact was discussed	Includes negative vs. positive comments about company	Includes negative vs. positive comments about CEO/execs
	Business Media					*Neg/Pos*	*Neg/Pos*
New York Times	*11*	*1*	*1*	*Praised-3*	*3*	*0/1*	
	PR/Tech Media						
AdFreak	3		2		2	0/1	
Mashable Blog	6	3			2	1/1	
Subtotal	*9*	*3*	*2*		*4*	*1/2*	
	Consumer						
Misc Blogs	*49*	*3*	*11*	*Praised-1 Quickly/Decisively*	*17*	*7/2 (mostly neg on "should have known who he was")*	
	Global Media						
Miscellaneous	*16*		*7*	*Praised-2*	*9*	*1/1- Howard Stern "should have known"*	
TOTAL	**85**	**7**	**21**	**Praised-6**	**33**	**9 negative/6 positive**	**N/A**

Appendix F: Aflac® – Content Analysis (page 2)

Print/Online Media Perception – March 14 – March 30, 2011

Media Outlet	Total Articles Reviewed	Overall Tone: Neutral /Negative	Overall Tone: Positive	Specifically critical of Gottfried's comments	Company's SCCT crisis response strategy used	Brand perception or financial impact discussed	Includes negative customer quote
	Business Media						
New York Times	*4*	*3*	*1*	*1*	*2 inform 1 rebuild*	*1*	
	PR/Tech Media						
AdFreak	2	1	1		1 inform 1 rebuild	1	
Mashable Blog	4	3 / 1 neg)			2 inform 1 rebuild	1	
Subtotal	*6*	*5*	*1*	*0*		*2*	
	Consumer						
Misc Blogs	*41*	*40 / 1 neg)*	*0*	*13*	*11 inform 3 rebuild*	*16*	
	Global Media						
Miscellaneous	*13*	*12*	*1*	*4*	*31 inform 22 rebuild*	*6*	
TOTAL	**64**	**59 neutral/2 negative)**	**3**	**18**	**47 inform/ 28 rebuild**	**25**	**0**

Appendix F: Aflac® – Content Analysis (page 3)

Print/Online Media Perception – April 1 – 30, 2011

Media Outlet	Total Articles Reviewed	Overall Tone: Neutral	Overall Tone: Positive	Specifically critical of Gottfried's comments	Company's SCCT crisis response strategy used	Brand perception or financial impact discussed	Includes negative customer quote
	Business Media						
New York Times	*5*	*3*	*2*	*1*	2 inform 2 rebuild	2	
	PR/Tech Media						
AdFreak	1	1			1 rebuild		
Mashable Blog	1		1		1 rebuild	1	
Subtotal	*2*	*1*	*1*	*0*		1	
	Consumer						
Misc. Blogs	*6*	*5*	*1*	*0*	4 rebuild	0	
	Global Media						
Miscellaneous	*3*	*1*	*2 (similar yet different versions)*		2 rebuild	3	
TOTAL	**16**	**10**	**4**	**1**	**2 inform/ 10 rebuild**	**6**	**0**

Appendix F: Aflac® – Content Analysis (page 4)

Print/Online Media Perception – May 1-15, 2011

Media Outlet	Total Articles Reviewed	Overall Tone: Neutral	Overall Tone: Positive	Specifically critical of Gottfried's Comments	Company's SCCT crisis response strategy used	Brand perception or financial impact discussed	Includes negative customer quote
	Business Media						
New York Times	*2*	*2*					
	PR/Tech Media						
Ad Freak	0						
Mashable Blog	1	1				1	
Subtotal	*1*	*1*				*1*	
	Consumer						
Misc. Blogs	*2*	*2*				*1*	
	Global Media						
Miscellaneous	*0*						
TOTAL	**5**	**5**	**N/A**	**N/A**	**N/A**	**2**	**0**