Perception is truth: How elite U.S. newspapers framed the "Go Green" conflict between BP and Greenpeace

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the dynamics of conflict between an organization and its activist publics in the framework of an environmental crisis. A qualitative framing analysis of news content from major U.S. newspapers was employed to identify how the two organizations in conflict were framed. This study also explored the impact of corporate reputation, corporate social responsibility, and conflict with activist publics on organizational credibility and crisis attribution as reported in U.S. print news media. An in-depth discussion of the six dominant frames that emerged from the sample under study is included.

Introduction

Pro-social messages about the environment have increased significantly within the past decade. Support of environmental pro-social messages is evident with the thousands of people who gather annually to celebrate Earth Day in an effort to bring awareness to their local and national governments on policies to curb pollution and increase energy efficiency. As environmental consciousness continues to rise in society, new efforts on changing individual and organizational behavior will surface. Within the past year, delegates at the United Nations-affiliated Indigenous Peoples' Global Summit on Climate Change consented on a declaration that was presented at the Conference of Parties at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, Denmark in December 2009. The declaration states, "Mother Earth is no longer in a period of climate change, but in climate crisis" (Pemberton, 2009).

Attempts to "Go Green" have not only made their way to the doors of public policy makers; they have influenced a wave of organizations' corporate social responsibility message on both the public and private sectors within the marketplace. The "Go Green" campaign has evoked visible changes in major industries altogether. For instance, in the aerospace industry, the pro-social message to "Go Green" is not solely a marketing idea, but rather a necessity for survival in a world of rapidly depleting natural resources and increased fuel prices. Yu (2008) reported that within the past few years, U.S. airlines have explored the practicalities of turbine power and have already initiated actions to save energy: "From low-flush toilets and hybrid taxis to solar panels and recycled coffee grounds, some of the largest airports are aggressively implementing green measures to save on energy costs and to generate favorable impressions among travelers," (para. 5). Moreover, government regulations have helped push for initiatives to seek alternative energy, develop improved technology, and use environmentally friendly material.

Conversely, with the rise in pro-social messages on corporate social responsibility to "Go Green", members of society have grown cynical of corporate decrees, deducing such messages as simple PR or marketing schemes. BP, formerly known as British Petroleum, has received major criticisms for its pro-social messages on protecting the environment. Activist publics, particularly environmental groups like Greenpeace International, have boycotted, rallied, and initiated major endeavors to challenge the organization's stance. For some activist publics, BP's pro-social messages (i.e., "Go Green") are conflicting due the product which sits at the core of the organization's success—oil. The primary argument remains: both the nature and history of the [oil] business are accountable for environmental degradation ("*Activists protest at BP*", 2001).

Public relations and mass communication research shows that conflicts and crises are both detrimental and beneficial to an organization. If improperly managed, an organization will lose public favor, which usually results in a longer recovery period (Coombs, 2000). When activist public are involved, each organizational message is critical to the preservation and promotion of the brand identity. When news media report on a conflict, their interpretation of conflict groups and placement of accountability shapes audiences' perceptions.

This empirical case study is guided by the Attribution theory as its core theoretical framework, and employs a framing analysis. The role of news media is of particular significance in this line of research because of the way they frame a conflict and crisis. Conflicting parties are attributed with positive and negative connotations that have led to the defined hero and villain roles. Media also attribute responsibility to the conflict, which influences the public's point of view. Due to hyper-exposure, "critical journalists, consumer groups or NGOs may feel particularly compelled to test the validity of the corporate CSR claims" (Morsing, Schultz, & Nielsen, 2008, p. 97). Thus, if media audiences perceive an organization responsible for a crisis, its corporate reputation will ultimately suffer, and popular belief shaped.

Background

After the acquiring Amoco in 1998, British Petroleum's Chief Executive Officer, Sir Lloyd Brown, initiated a new vision for his oil and energy company that competitors considered a conflicting message. At a time when scientific evidence of global warming was lacking and carbon regulations were not enforced, Sir Brown decided to rebrand the company with a corporate social responsibility message no other oil or energy company ever dared to do—to "Go Green". "Out went the old British Petroleum shield that had been a familiar image in Britain for more than 70 years, and in came a green, yellow and white sunburst that seemed to suggest a warm and fuzzy feeling about the earth. BP press officers were careful not to explain exactly what 'Beyond Petroleum' meant, but the slogan, coupled with the cheerful sunburst, sent the message that the company was looking past oil and gas toward a benign, eco-friendly future of solar and renewable energy" (Frey, 2002). The tag line, logo, abbreviated brand name, and corporate social responsibility (henceforth CSR) message evolved into something that environmentalists could celebrate, or so it was thought.

Since British Petroleum repositioned itself, the conflict with environmental group Greenpeace International has grown two-fold. From boycotts to protests, Greenpeace relentlessly challenges BP's stance and standards. On April 11, 2009, BP's centenary celebration was canceled when rumors that BP activists were organizing a major rally to voice charges against

the company. BP received another wave of mainstream news coverage when activists protested against them during the 2009 G20 summit in London. For ten years, BP's efforts and messages have been challenged by Greenpeace, making it one of the most recognizable conflicts in within the "Go Green" movement.

Theoretical Framework

The current study primarily draws on the Attribution theory, derived from public relations research, for its theoretical framework. A framing analysis was used to inform the Attribution theory in this investigation. Entman (1993) defines framing as an active process of drawing out dominant themes from content. Dickerson (2001) explains, "repetition of certain words and phrases across the life of a story shapes meaning by telling readers what the important story elements are and how to think about them" (p. 168). Reese (2001) points out that framing is one way in which we try to make sense of the world: "framing refers to the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences" (p. 7). Studies in social science research have shown that prevalent frames in news content shape public opinion, and construct reality. Entman (2007) claims that framing is "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (p.164). The study of framing as a media effect is based on the belief that framing has a psychological effect on individuals' perceived reality. Pan and Kosicki (1993) argue that "framing is viewed as placing information in a unique context so that certain elements of the issue get a greater allocation of an individual's cognitive resources" (p. 57). Framing influences the way an individual understands an issue or makes sense of a news event from the portrayals of media producers, such that "[f]rames are seen as patterns of interpretation through which people classify information in order to handle it efficiently" (Scheufele, 2004, p. 402). Therefore, public opinion is immediately transformed when media attribute responsibility in a conflict.

The Attribution theory explains that once a crisis has unfolded, the publics involved will immediately assess crisis responsibility because people have a need to search for causes of an event. "Attribution theory posits that people look for the causes of events, especially unexpected and negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2007, p. 136). Over the past few years, scholars have examined the relevance of the Attribution theory to assumed corporate responsibility in crisis communication literature. Coombs (1998) examined how three elements of a crisis situation can affect perceptions of crisis responsibility: crisis attributions, organizational performance, and severity of the crisis. The author argued that "as perceptions of crisis responsibility strengthen, the threat of image damage should strengthen" (p. 180). He found that personal control attribution was positively related to crisis responsibility and negatively related to organizational image, and added that organizations with a history of crises (i.e., negative performance history) intensified the perception of crisis responsibility. Similarly, Lee (2004) explored causal attribution, organizational crisis responses, and crisis severity in relation to consumers' cognitive, perceptual, and affective reactions to an organizational crisis. The author argued that both causal attribution and crisis response type affected the audiences' judgment of organizational responsibility for the crisis, their overall impression of the organization, level of sympathy toward the organization, and trust in the organization.

Literature Review

Conflicts with pro-social messages

Pro-social messages are any nonviolent, social message designed to be helpful or beneficial to the whole of society, and are deemed preferable by society's majority (Rushton, 1982). When an organization publicly announces its pro-social message, it attests to its corporate social responsibility. For message recipients, such pro-social messages are an extension of an organization's personal promise. "Since brand support has been linked to the credible corporate promise of enriching the lives of consumers and other stakeholders, its perceived violation stands to reveal the falsehood of that promise" (Palazzo & Basu, 2007, p. 339).

When Palazzo and Basu (2007) explored how stakeholders perceived the consumption values communicated by a brand and related life values, they pointed out that a mixture of discontent on either of the two variables leads to activism, rejection, and indifference among stakeholders. The authors posited that conflict is best avoided when consumption values and life values the organization communicates are viewed favorably by stakeholders while the organization grounds itself on an identity.

In Insch's (2008) investigation of corporate Websites from New Zealand's electricity and gas retailers, and the pro-social messages that were highlighted in the home page, the author noted that all but one of the 18 Websites offered a detailed reference to the natural environment. The dominant theme within their pro-social messages was the intent to achieve greater energy efficiency. According to the author, 67% of the Websites communicated their goal to improve energy efficiency through the use of enhanced technology and energy sources. Approximately 56% of the Websites highlighted minimizing negative environmental impacts through 'clean' or 'green' energy sources in combination with a position on 'environmentally friendly' energy sources under company development. The third most prevalent pro-social message identified among the Websites mentioned New Zealand's obligation under the Kyoto Protocol and a mission to reduce greenhouse emissions.

Relevance and uses of Corporate Social Responsibility on corporate reputation

Previous studies (Kim, Kim, & Cameron, 2009; Palazzo & Basu, 2007; De Blasio, 2007; Cho & Hong, 2009) in crisis communication literature have found that CSR plays an important role in crisis management, particularly because it communicates an organization's commitment to avoiding harm and improving societal standards. Kim et al. (2009) posited that "effects of CSR messages were contingent upon other crisis factors such as crisis types and crisis issues" (p. 13), noting that CSR-driven messages should be used accordingly and not as default. In facets of advertising and marketing, CSR is significant in that it communicates an organization's intent to improve its corporate practices and impact on society overall.

Activist publics

"Significantly, the impact of globalization has led to the increasing migration of the target of civic engagement from political systems (e.g. nation states) to large (especially multinational) corporations, with powerful civil society associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Greenpeace, Amnesty International, or WWF beginning to target globally discernible branded corporate entities. As the No Logo debate shows, the best brands often face the highest pressure" (Palazzo & Basu, 2007, p. 338). In the past few years, crisis communication research (Yarbrough, Cameron, Sallot, & McWilliams, 1998; Cameron et al., 2001) has shown that one of the most difficult challenges an organization is faced with is

appeasing activist publics. Palazzo and Basu (2007) describe activist groups as central to civic activism, such that "it often has its roots in a small but vocal minority who are able to influence public opinion through their salient acts" (p. 339). Anderson (1992) noted an increased expansion of activist groups over time: "In the 1980s, activists developed sophistication and expanded their influence; activism on a global scale became a trend" (p. 152). Whether the conflict is over a moral issue or past wrongdoing, activist publics are driven by their passion to challenge the organization openly, and to impede its operations.

Framing studies

Media can shape public opinion through framing, which can inevitably support or challenge dominant ideology. Demonstrated in analysis either quantitatively or qualitatively, framing affords simplicity as it identifies symbolic patterns attributed to a subject or event. Hume (2002) notes that "the press, through framing, plays a part in projecting cultural metaphors to a mass audience" (p. 38). In order to establish impact on audience perceptions, frames must be repetitious, creating a dominant message. Entman (1993) posits that the most impactful frames are those that possess the most cultural resonance, prominence, and repetition (frequency). As a means to identify dominant themes and patterns reported in media, many scholars have employed framing analyses to understand the issues under scrutiny at a specific moment in time within a given culture.

Studies in social science research have addressed the use of frames in the understanding of health issues, diplomatic relations, political movements, and war. For instance, Luther and Zhou (2005) conducted a comparative content analysis of major daily Chinese and American newspaper coverage that focused on the SARS epidemic. Through framing analysis, the authors identified five major frames embedded within the both countries' coverage and applied the presence-absence technique in their initial analysis of a sample of news stories, which led them to identify four major news frames and acknowledge a new frame. In Phalen and Algan's (2001) study of the framing of the 1995 Fourth UN World Conference on Women in *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, the authors discovered that the newspapers were more concentrated on the geographical and ideological contexts between the United States and China than substantive women's issues presented at the conference. In their content analysis, the authors identified recurring themes that helped explain the phenomenon at hand. Phalen and Algan (2001) contended "[t]he configuration of themes and agents made salient through horizontal and vertical repetition has the potential to reinforce certain interpretations of the conference" (p. 304). By documenting the location of the dominant frame in the news stories, the authors posited that the salience of one dominant frame shapes the public's perception of the event, and transforms the very importance of the issues: "Given that people often read only the first few paragraphs of stories, this skew can have a significant effect on perceptions of the Women's Conference" (Phalen & Algan, 2001, p. 305).

When Kensicki (2001) employed a framing analysis in her study of newspaper coverage of the Deaf President Now (DPN) political movement, she based her method design on the positive and negative framing of written and photographic content in three U.S. publications: *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and the *Silent News*. In her analysis, Kensicki (2001) found that the frames identified in the articles were majority positive in view of the movement. The author also ascertained four dominant frames from the content. By noting the frequency of

these frames and identifying their most prevalent uses, she was able to associate the emergence of the frames in relation to the protest timeline. The author concluded that the overwhelming positive frames in the news coverage were evidence of media hegemony. In a similar study, Carpenter (2007) investigated the framing of the Iraq War. The author compared how elite and non-elite newspapers portrayed the war, and determined whether or not non-elite publications emulated elite publications in times of turmoil. She examined differences in the way they framed stories of the Iraq War, recorded the sources cited, and discussed predictors of how the newspapers disseminated information. Her analysis included two elite and four non-elite newspapers for a three-year time period during and after the U.S. War on Iraq in 2003. The author found that the use of frames and the inclusion of international, national, and local sources differed significantly. The origin of sources demonstrated that each publication type varied in how it portrayed the war to its readers. Finally, in Winfield and Friedman's (2003) qualitative study of Election 2000, framing was approached from an ideological analysis. By analyzing six print articles and 45 broadcast transcripts from four major U.S. networks and three major newspapers, the authors identified a range of frames that were consistently used to portray the women.

My study examined the dynamics of conflict between activist publics and transnational organizations by focusing on the media framing of the "Go Green" conflict between BP and Greenpeace. This manuscript explored the impact of corporate reputation on organizational credibility, CSR, and conflict/crisis attribution as reported in U.S. print news media. This approach is important because newspapers serve as a catalyst for public debate on government policies (Sei-Hill et al., 2002). With the focus on frames and conflict attributes in the environmental crisis framework within print news media, this study posed the following research questions: first, how do attributions in the conflict shape the way BP and Greenpeace were framed in the news stories? Second, how do the credibility frames in pro-social messages credited to BP compare to those of Greenpeace? Third, which conflict group was assigned overall causal attribution? And, fourth, what relationship emerges between the frames in the news stories?

Methods

To examine these questions, I collected ten years of news stories from the Lexis-Nexis database. One crucial element to this investigation is the time period in which the news stories were published. Since BP first launched its "Go Green" campaign in 2000, news stories dating back to 1999 offer significant value in my analysis. Since rumors of the BP's repositioning surfaced in late fall 1999, that time period was included in the search. Thus, a full-text search was conducted using the following keywords: "BP" and "Greenpeace" for newspapers published in the United States from October 3, 1999 to October 3, 2009. To be included in the content analysis, a story had to mention the conflict between members of Greenpeace and BP in either the headline or body text in the general news, international news, or business/financial section. The initial search offered 125 news stories from local and national U.S. newspapers. American newspapers were the focal point for the sampling because the Western style of news reporting leads the rest of the world in the style of news coverage. Newspapers to be included in the final sample had to fit the criteria for large circulation size. Media news coverage of the conflict was gathered from: *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*; *The Boston Herald*; *Chicago Sun-Times*; *Dallas Observer (Texas)*; *The Denver Post*; *The Houston Chronicle*; *The New York Times*; *The*

Oregonian; *The San Francisco Chronicle*; *San Jose Mercury News*; *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*;
St. Louis Post-Dispatch; *USA Today*; *The Wall Street Journal; The Washington Post*; and *The
Washington Times*. News articles were selected on the basis of relevance to the conflict. A final
sample size of 40 news stories was pooled from the initial 60 that were yielded (refer to Table 1).

National U.S. newspapers	Quantity of news stories
San Jose Mercury News	1
Seattle Post-Intelligencer	1
St. Louis Post-Dispatch	3
The Houston Chronicle	7
The New York Times	14
The Oregonian	1
The San Francisco Chronicle	3
The Washington Post	9
The Washington Times	1

Table 1: *Final sample*

It should be noted that the top three newspapers included in the final sample that yielded
the greatest amount of coverage on the conflict for the ten-year period were *The New York Times*
(n = 14), *The Washington Post* (n = 9), and *The Houston Chronicle* (n = 7). Understanding the
frames within such coverage is of importance not only because these newspapers offered the
most coverage, but also because *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are elite
newspapers that others model themselves after. Understanding the scope of their coverage
affords a greater perspective of the way other newspapers frame the issue. *The Houston
Chronicle* may have also offered more frequent reporting due to the proximity and location of
BP's national headquarters, which were located in Houston and Texas City, Texas.

Framing analysis

The aim of this research design is to recognize dual aspects of cause attributions and key
frames ascribed to each conflict group in reference to the environment. As posited by Neuman
(1992), "[H]ow bits of information gleaned from the news fit into a person's larger framework of
understanding important topics of public debate" (p. 7). A framing analysis of the news stories in
this study is an essential tool used to identify the dominant attributions within the conflict that is
communicated to the masses. Kiousis (2006) also posited that it is important to determine
whether the research is measuring "the perception of the message sources, perceptions of
channels through which messages travel, and perceptions of messages themselves" (p. 349).

From a preliminary reading of articles, four sets of frames were identified. Two frames
that related to attribution were added to the list of frames in order to expand on the full scope of
the study. Listed according to priority, the following frames and attribution concepts served as a

guide for my qualitative framing analysis: 1) credibility frame; 2) power frame; 3) causal attribution; 4) social responsibility attribution; 5) hero frame; and 6) villain frame.

Credibility. Credibility (low or high) extends to the implied trustworthiness of the conflict group. For example, an article that stated "Last March, Lord John Browne, the group chief executive of the British oil giant BP, gave a speech at Stanford University" (Frey, 2002) implies BP is highly credible due to its association with a highly reputable university. An article that argued "When you talk to BP officials about that commitment, they trot out a host of examples to prove that it's not just public relations. BP owns a big solar energy company. It has significantly lowered its greenhouse-gas emissions. It has a thriving biofuels program. And it is investing $8 billion over 10 years in alternative energy, like solar and wind power (though it includes natural gas as an alternative energy, which strikes me as a stretch). Yet at its core, BP remains an oil company, and no matter how much it says it wants to create more environmentally sensitive sources of energy, its basic task is still to stick holes in the ground in search of hydrocarbons" (Nocera, 2006) suggests BP is of low credibility because its CSR message is only a façade to its true purpose.

Power. Power relates to the financial or political status (low or high) of a conflict group characterized in the news story. For example, an article that contended "In fairness, though, it must be conceded that the evil BP committed the unforgivable act of merging with another evil oil company, Amoco Corp. of the United States. Following the merger, the evil conglomerate purchased the United States' Atlantic Richfield Co. and Britain's Burmah Castrol PLC. The sinister mega corporation has also achieved record profits, partially as a result of higher oil and natural-gas prices" (Limbaugh, 2001) attributes BP with a high level of power because it partnered itself with another mega-oil company.

Social responsibility. The social responsibility attribution signifies which primary conflict group is assigned the greater role in carrying out the responsibility of the protection and preservation of the environment, which ultimately translates to the "Go Green" movement. For instance, an article that reported "'In the last two years, we have developed a good off-grid rural market. We are selling solar home lighting systems that come with rooftop panels directly to villagers who have no access to electricity,' said Anil Patni of Tata BP Solar, an Indian joint venture with the U.S.-based BP Solar. The company works with rural banks to offer small loans of about $300 to villagers to set up solar lighting systems" suggests that BP is meeting up to its corporate social responsibility.

Causal. Causal attribution reveals primary accountability for the conflict. For instance, an article that stated "Five months earlier, in another part of the pipeline also maintained by BP, a spill of 200,000 to 300,000 gallons of oil had been found, making it the largest oil spill ever on the North Slope. It was only when the federal government then demanded that the company conduct a thorough inspection of the rest of the pipeline that the corrosion was discovered" (Nocera, 2006) suggests that BP is the primary party held accountable for the conflict.

Hero. The hero frame conveys that the conflict group was favored more by the general public. For example, an article that stated "Although BP's drilling programs off Alaska have sparked protests by Greenpeace, the company has scored points with environmentalists by withdrawing from a coalition of oil companies, automakers, electric utilities and others opposed to the Kyoto

Treaty on global warming" (Behr, 2000) attributes a hero frame to BP. In this case, BP is taking a stance towards environmental regulation, which is a heroic act for an oil company.

Villain. The villain frame conveys that the conflict group was favored less by the general public. The villain in the conflict is one that is only concerned about self interests, selfish, and unresponsive to the well-being of society. For example, an article that argued "It may seem unfair that BP is the target of environmental and social-responsibility movements. Shouldn't Greenpeace et al. be going after Exxon Mobil, which still tries to sow public skepticism toward global warming theories and has reportedly worked behind the scenes to remove a prominent scientist from the United Nations climate change panel and still refuses to pay $5 billion in punitive damages ordered by an Alaska court after the 1989 Valdez oil spill?" (Frey, 2002) conveys BP as a victim of an oppressive attack initiated by Greenpeace—the villain in the narrative.

Within each story, conveyed meaning was derived from cited sources, quotes and the authors' review of the conflict. Narratives were coded for patterns that explained the cause of the conflict, and an exhaustive identification of the primary actors involved was employed. It should be noted that more than 98% of the sample tallied more than a 500-word count. Each news story was read thoroughly until a substantive thick description was drawn.

Findings

Overall, the news stories were heavily embedded with the six frames and attribution concepts under investigation. A majority of the news stories (87%; $n = 35$) mentioned both BP and Greenpeace in conflict. The other 12% ($n = 5$) reported on only one of the two parties with relevance to other issues that were still regarded critical to the environmental crisis (i.e., policy changes, current and emerging oppositions, and other conflict groups).

How attributions in the conflict shaped the way BP and Greenpeace were framed

The news stories conveyed BP as an organization with a great deal of power (75%; $n = 30$), attributed the primary cause of the environmental crisis (72.5%; $n = 29$), specifically climate change, and portrayed it as the main villain in the narrative (60%; $n = 24$). BP also was framed as a company that somewhat lived up to its CSR (50%; $n = 20$). Overall, the news stories framed the company as a mega-corporation that is the cause of the environmental crisis, not only due to its drilling activities in the Arctic, but also because it is an oil company. For example, one news article opens with a seemingly sarcastic tone as it describes BP's green-friendly logo and marketing campaign. One author emphasizes his feelings towards BP's CSR message:

> "Walking through an airport earlier this week, I happened to spot a BP advertisement. You   know the kind I'm talking about: the letters BP in lower-case type—making them somehow   warmer and fuzzier—above a yellow and green sun, and the words 'beyond petroleum.' Like   most BP ads, indeed, like virtually all BP marketing, it spoke to the company's commitment to the environment. And here's what I thought when I saw it: 'Yeah, right'" (Nocera, 2006).

In a condescending tone, the author questions whether or not the company was living up to its commitment to be socially responsible. Nocera (2006) cites a previous incident that ultimately propelled the federal government to demand BP thorough inspections of its pipelines. Further evidence of the author's cynicism and suspicion surfaces with the statement: "'Still, it

was hard not to wonder: this is the environmentally friendly oil company?'" The author compares BP's record to its competitor, Exxon, and concludes that Exxon has a better history in containing and preventing oil spills. The BP corporate history, from changes in its CSR message to its logo, is provided before the author discusses the fallacies of BP's message and the failures it must held accountable for.

Although Greenpeace assumed the role of an organization with some power (52.5%; $n = 21$), it was framed as the hero in the conflict (72.5%; $n = 29$). Greenpeace was viewed to meet the public's expectations in carrying out its CSR (87.5%; $n = 35$). The general public and the news writers perceived protests, boycotts, and public accusations as actions that enriched the organization's reputation. Greenpeace was attributed the role of the watchdog and the protector of the helpless environment. News stories framed Greenpeace as the underdog that continually challenged evil oil companies, such as BP, in hopes to change their stance: "Earlier this month, BP had Ritzman and two other Greenpeace members arrested for trespassing when they set foot on the island. The three left the Arctic as a condition of their bail, but three others replaced them" (The Associated Press [AP], 2000). In this instance, Greenpeace is seemingly powerless in its protest; however, it remains relentless in its fight as other activists enter the conflict.

Comparison of BP and Greenpeace credibility frames in their pro-social messages

Both organizations' level of credibility was associated to their perceived CSR. For instance, Greenpeace was perceived as highly credible in 72.5% ($n = 29$) of the news stories and was viewed as having sustained its CSR in 87.5% ($n = 35$) of the sample. In comparison, BP earned high credibility with 45% ($n = 18$) of the articles and 50% ($n = 20$) agreed that the organization maintained its CSR.

Greenpeace was framed as the conflict group with greater credibility because it was viewed as one that was more genuine in its pro-social message. The news media accepted Greenpeace as one of the most highly recognized rebellious nongovernmental organizations group whose stance was to challenge oil companies: "Greenpeace developed the hallmark tactic of boarding vessels at sea to advertise its protests. But beyond that, linked by the Internet and a sense of shared objectives, nongovernmental organizations are building networks of influence as the representatives of what they term 'civil society,' acting essentially as self-appointed watchdogs on dubious corporate behavior" (Cowell, 2000). Whenever Greenpeace organized a high profile protest, the tone of the news stories seemed supportive of the organization's actions. On the other hand, BP was questioned for the accuracy in its reports, motivations for new projects, and true interests in the environment. As a large for-profit organization, BP was associated with other mega-corporations and oil companies that carried a poor crisis history. Moreover, historical references were made, comparing BP to the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989, which lowered BP's credibility as an organization and the trustworthiness of its CSR message.

Assignment of overall causal attribution

BP was assigned with causal attribution more so than Greenpeace. From the sample, 72.5% ($n = 29$) portrayed BP as the cause of the conflict, whereas only 20% ($n = 8$) ascribed Greenpeace as the primary cause. The news stories acknowledged the dangers of global warming and climate change, and reasoned that oil companies were to blame for their lack of proactive measures of development in alternative energy. Although BP was credited as one of the more progressive oil companies in terms of solar energy research, it was still blamed for environmental degradation due to its product and its practice. One article stated: "[Greenpeace]

and other environmentalists see the industry as greedily violating the pristine Arctic Ocean and setting the stage for a disastrous spill of crude into the gin-clear water" (AP, 2000). The imagery used in this statement enhanced causal attribution towards BP. Another reported: "Greenpeace is protesting BP's Northstar offshore drilling platform, which is under construction off the north coast of Alaska in the Arctic Ocean. Northstar would be the first offshore drilling operation in the Arctic Ocean, and Greenpeace maintains that it would threaten the Arctic ecosystem" (*Arctic Barge,* 2000). As shown in the citation, BP is framed as a threat to the ecosystem. As the first to operate in an untouched territory, BP is automatically attributed cause for the destruction of the environment. It should also be noted that the presence of Greenpeace activists in any BP drilling operation insinuates suspicious activity on BP's part. With Greenpeace playing the watchdog role in the news stories, readers immediately assign BP as the guilty party.

Relationship between the frames in the news stories

In my analysis, it was clear that there was a strong relationship between the hero frame and credibility frame. Greenpeace was framed as the hero because it was viewed as a highly credible organization with minimal cause attribution assignments. Reporters were forgiving even though Greenpeace was highly involved in the conflict, and was to some extent portrayed as the rebellious party. In many aspects, reporters expected Greenpeace to act as extremists to fulfill its responsibility as a grass-roots organization. As an activist public, Greenpeace was deemed strong if it acted aggressively to enforce regulations.

Another relationship that surfaced from the analysis was causal attribution, low credibility, and the villain frame. BP was conveyed as the villain, prescribed with low credibility or high causal attribution. The news stories relayed low credibility and high causal attribution as characteristics of a villain. When BP was framed with low credibility, the new stories applied cues that defined the organization as a villain. BP was described as evil, selfish, and hurtful. BP was also identified as another oil company whose sole intention was to generate profit at the environment's expense. Such descriptors cultivated a poor image of BP, which reinforced the notion of the notorious oil company that would doom our future.

A pattern of consistency between the frames was found in the two top elite newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. It is important to take note of this since it points to evidence of media hegemony. News stories published in the same time frame, less than two months apart, were compared. The analysis showed that the newspapers' frames paralleled one other. Between December 13, 1999 and June 1, 2001, the two most influential newspapers in this analysis, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post,* framed BP as credible half of the time; extremely powerful; the cause of the conflict; not having lived up to its CSR in early 2000, but then meeting their standards in late 2000 and early 2001; and the villain.

Improving validity

As a means to improve validity, I applied the strategies of reflexivity and peer review. I actively searched for potential biases and predispositions during my data analysis and reassessed the conclusions drawn. Each news story was read in random order three times in a one month period, where personal notes and additional comments were reviewed. I also engaged in a discussion of my interpretations with a disinterested peer, which afforded an extensive examination of the study.

Discussion

As shown in previous research, framing shapes the way we perceive an event or an individual. By considering the angles to a story, we begin to see a more complete account of the larger picture. In this investigation, framing analysis plays a major role in informing attribution theory. Analyzing data from the approach of framing analysis cultivated meaning as the process identified how frames were attributed defining roles and the way media sculpted their coverage of the conflict and attributed responsibility. Due to the nature of the conflict, it was important to understand conveyed and embedded meaning within the news stories, and perceived blame. By applying a qualitative approach in framing analysis, we not only gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics infused in a news event, we can examine exactly how that event or individual has made an imprint on society by means of the media coverage that surrounded them.

By constructing a research design based on framing analysis, patterns of attribution, credibility in both organizations' pro-social messages, assumed corporate social responsibility, and the relationship between activist publics and the organization were identified. As this study shows, the dominant frames and attributions that were identified in the news coverage can shape readers' perceptions of the environmental issue and the groups that are deeply involved in setting policies.

By assessing the relationships between the frames, this study not only incorporated its findings into the greater theoretical framework of conflict and crisis literature, but contributed to the relevance of the framing of conflict in PR and mass communication scholarship. PR practitioners may especially gain insights that news media frame large organizations in the private sector differently from conflicting organizations in the public sector, relative to the crisis and historical association at hand. The findings offered in this study further assist industry professionals in their knowledge of crisis and conflict frames, which may help in the development of PR strategy and conflict resolution. For PR scholars and practitioners, understanding elements of organizational conflict and crisis is of great importance not only due to the value of brand reputation, but also due to the influence of news media on public memory, and the ultimate framing of accountability. Lastly, the identification and comparison of the frames and attributes assigned to the conflict in this study will not only assist scholars and industry professionals in broadening their understanding of how media report conflict, but more importantly how public debates centered on government policies are formulated, especially in a crisis framework.

Future research

This study may be further enriched with the incorporation of a quantitative content analysis. In the near future, an expansion of this study shall include an analysis of time variation in the framework of conflict contingency between major American and British newspapers. A comparative study may lend insight to cross-cultural differences in the framing of this conflict. In supplement, a series of in-depth interviews from members of BP and Greenpeace could support and challenge the findings derived from my content analyses. It should be noted that these additional angles to my current study are held under high consideration to further enhance and expand the scope of this investigation.

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