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## How do the news media frame crises? A content analysis of crisis news coverage

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### ABSTRACT

The present study is a content analysis of crisis news frames found in 2006 crisis news coverage. A total of 247 news stories were analyzed to examine which of five news frames (attribution of responsibility, human interest, conflict, morality, and economic) and level of responsibility (individual and organizational level) were used by the media according to crisis type. While the attribution of responsibility frame was the most predominantly used in crisis news coverage, the use of each of the five frames depended on crisis type. The use of level of responsibility also varied by crisis type and was related to the five frames; individual level of responsibility was used more with morality, human interest, and attribution of responsibility frames. Implications and suggestions based on the results were discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Frames are powerful mechanisms that can help define and solve problems and shape public opinion (Knight, 1999). Much of the research on framing has focused on media frames in relation to public policy issues, although framing research is also potentially useful for identifying the strategic messages created by public relations practitioners (Hallahan, 1999). In crisis communication, framing analysis can provide crisis managers with useful insights into the appropriate crisis response strategies to minimize the damage to an organization's image (Boyd, 2000; Coombs, 2006a; Hearit, 1994). Typologies of crisis response strategies have been developed and tested through framing research (e.g., Benoit, 1995; Coombs, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 1996).

However, that approach fails to consider how the media framed the crisis at the outset. A crisis is "an event for which people seek causes and make attributions" (Coombs & Holladay, 2004, p. 97). People seek information about the crisis and evaluate the cause of the event and the organizational responsibility for the crisis based on media coverage of the crisis. Therefore, it is important to look at how the media frame a crisis event, the cause of the crisis, and the actor responsible for it because those frames influence the public's perception and impressions of the organization (Coombs, 2006b).

This study aims to fill that gap by identifying what kinds of news frames have been used in the coverage of crises. Based on previous research into news framing, this study uses a content analysis to explore the different media frames used by crisis type. Ultimately, the findings can better inform crisis managers of the influence of news coverage on people's perceptions and, simultaneously, can have implications for future research into response strategies.

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## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Framing analysis in crisis communication

People's perceptions of and inferences about events are dependent on what information or feature is salient in the environment (Heider, 1958). Framing theory suggests that the mass media do even more than create saliency. By selecting what to include and what to exclude from a story, the news media frame a story (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Pan & Kosicki, 1993); that is, the media limit or define the story's meaning and thereby shape people's interpretation of that story (Hallahan, 1999).

Previous literature has identified a handful of frames that occur commonly in the news. Neuman, Just, & Crigler (1992) discussed comprehensively several different types of frames dominantly used in U.S. news coverage: conflict, economic consequences, human impact, and morality. Based on these frames, Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) analyzed five national newspapers and television news stories in the period surrounding the Amsterdam meeting of European heads of state in 1997 and identified five news frames in order of predominance: attribution of responsibility, conflict, economic, human interest, and morality.

#### 2.1.1. Human interest frame

This frame "brings a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue, or problem" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 95). In crisis situations, the frame stimulates the psychological pulse of people, which ultimately leads them to a more negative attitude toward the crisis (Padin, 2005, October 12). Cho and Gower (2006) showed that the human interest frame influenced participants' emotional response, and that it was a significant predictor of blame and responsibility in a transgression crisis.

#### 2.1.2. Conflict frame

The conflict frame is used in such a way as to reflect conflict and disagreement among individuals, groups, or organizations. Neuman et al. (1992) found that conflict was commonly used by U.S. news media. In the Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) study, the conflict frame was the second most common frame, and the more serious the newspaper, the more the conflict frame was in evidence.

#### 2.1.3. Morality frame

This frame puts the event, problem, or issue in the context of morals, social prescriptions, and religious tenets. Neuman et al. (1992) found that the morality frame was commonly used by journalists indirectly through quotations or inference, rather than directly because of the journalistic norm of objectivity.

#### 2.1.4. Economic frame

This frame reports an event, problem, or issue in terms of the consequences it will have economically on an individual, groups, organizations, or countries. Neuman et al. (1992) identified it as a common frame in the news. The wide impact of an event is an important news value, and economic consequences are often considerable (Graber, 1993).

#### 2.1.5. Attribution of responsibility frame

This frame is defined as "a way of attributing responsibility for [a] cause or solution to either the government or to an individual or group" (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000, p. 96). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) found that the attribution of responsibility frame was most commonly used in serious newspapers.

### 2.2. Level of responsibility frame: individual vs. organizational

Iyengar (1991) identified two distinct news frames dealing with issues: the episodic news frame (focusing on certain individuals or specific events) and the thematic news frame (placing issues and events in general context at the societal or governmental level). At the same time, media can present problems and their solutions as either an individual's or society's responsibility. The problem of elder abuse, for example, is presented as an individual problem with an individual solution rather than as a societal problem requiring a societal response (Mastin, Choi, Barboza, & Post, 2007). News media then, have a critical role in shaping public opinion about who is responsible for causing or solving key social problems (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Thus, this study aims to identify how level of responsibility is covered by the news media across crisis types by applying Iyengar's individual and organizational (societal/governmental in Iyengar's terms) levels of responsibility. Additionally, we examined how the previous five news frames are used in conjunction with the levels of responsibility. Based on previous discussions, we asked the following research questions:

RQ1. Which of the five news frames have been used in crisis news coverage?

RQ2. How differently have the frames been used according to crisis types?

RQ3. How differently have the level of responsibility frames been used in crisis news coverage according to crisis types?

RQ4. How differently have the five news frames been used according to level of responsibility?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Sample

##### 3.1.1. 2006 crisis event

This study investigated news coverage of crisis events during 2006 through a content analysis. We selected as our crisis event sample the top 10 crisis prone businesses as identified in the 2006 annual crisis report published by the *Institute for Crisis Management* (ICM), a research-based crisis communications consulting firm. In this report, crisis is defined as “any problem or disruption that triggers negative stakeholder reactions that could impact the organization’s business and financial strength.” The 10 businesses were Enron, HP, Microsoft, Wal-Mart, Northwest Airlines, Merck, Computer Associate (CA), Goodyear Tire, Boeing, and Delta Airline. Then, in order to give us a variety of crisis types, we searched and added the following to our sample of 10 companies for a total of 25 organizations that faced crises in 2006: Diamond Pet Food Company, WorldCom, Dell, Sony, Apple, Crown Princess, Freddie Mac, Pfizer, Bristol-Myers Squibb, Anderson Guest House (a Missouri group home), CAI Inc. (Danvers, Mass.), Methodist Hospital, Mizpah Hotel (Reno, Nev.), Falk Corp. (Milwaukee), and Tenet Healthcare.

##### 3.1.2. News coverage

The study analyzed news articles related to the companies’ crisis events covered by three major newspapers, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *USA Today*, during 2006. These three newspapers have been recognized as elite news journals and are large national circulation newspapers. Also these newspapers are used often for content analysis research (e.g., Christie, 2006; Wanta, 1993; Winter & Eyal, 1981). News articles published in these three newspapers were collected through an electronic database search in *Lexis-Nexis* using the key words of the companies’ names or related events, related employees or employers, related products, etc.

This study limited the time period of news articles to within 1 month of when each crisis occurred because crises are most newsworthy at the beginning of the crisis. A total of 247 news articles related to the companies’ crises were found and analyzed in the three newspapers during 2006: *New York Times* ( $n = 118$ ), *Washington Post* ( $n = 79$ ), and *USA Today* ( $n = 50$ ).

#### 3.2. Coding categories and measures

The unit of analysis was one news article. The coding instrument consisted of the name of the newspaper, name of the company, crisis type, five news frames, and level of responsibility frame.

For crisis type, the definitions of crisis typologies by Coombs (2006a) were used. Coombs identified three categories of crisis type, each with sub-categories: (1) victim clusters (natural disaster, rumors, workplace violence, and product tampering), (2) accidental clusters (challenges, megadamage, technical error accidents, and technical error recalls), and (3) preventable clusters (human breakdown accidents, human breakdown product recalls, organizational misdeed with no injuries, organizational misdeed management misconduct, and organizational misdeeds with injuries). For this study, strike and bankruptcy were added to the preventable cluster because they are commonly observed in industry practice and also considered crises. Overall, the sample of this study has victim crises ( $n = 13$ , 5.3%), accidental crises ( $n = 24$ , 9.7%), and preventable crises ( $n = 210$ , 85%).

To measure the extent to which certain frames appear in news stories, we used the coding scheme from Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), which consists of a series of 15 questions to which the coder had to answer yes (1) or no (0). Each question was meant to measure one of the five news frames.

#### 3.3. Coding procedure

Two well-trained coders analyzed all articles. Each coder coded the articles independently. For the inter-coder reliability test, two coders coded 50 articles that were randomly selected. Using Holsti’s method, the inter-coder reliability was 0.87.

### 4. Findings

#### 4.1. Five crisis news frames (RQ1)

The values of each framing scale were coded as 0 (frame not present) or 1 (frame present). We summed up each item of five news frames to create the score of each news frame. The score of the human interest frame ranged from 0 (not at all used) to 4 (four items used). The other four news frames ranged from 0 (not at all used) to 3 (three items used). A high on the scale of the particular news frame indicated that the news coverage had a high degree of the particular frame (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows that 95.1% (235 news articles) of the crisis news stories in our sample used at least one item of attribution of responsibility frame. The economic frame appeared at least once in 74.9% of the coverage. The human interest frame was

**Table 1**  
Use of the five news frames.

Use/no use	Five news frames				
	Attribution of responsibility	Human interest	Conflict	Morality	Economic
No use	12 (4.9)	88 (35.6)	92 (37.2)	136 (55.1)	62 (25.1)
Use					
One item	66 (26.7)	47 (19.0)	42 (17.0)	21 (8.5)	32 (13.0)
Two items	141 (57.1)	22 (8.9)	45 (18.2)	69 (27.9)	72 (29.1)
Three items	28 (11.3)	57 (23.1)	68 (27.5)	21 (8.5)	81 (32.8)
Four items	–	33 (13.4)	–	–	–
Total	247 (100.0)	247 (100.0)	247 (100.0)	247 (100.0)	247 (100.0)

Note: Values in parentheses represent percentage.

used in 64.4%, and conflict frame was used in 62.8% of the news stories at least once. However, a majority of news stories (55.1%) did not use a morality frame.

#### 4.2. Five news frames by crisis types (RQ2)

Chi-square tests showed a significant difference among three crisis types in the use of the attribution of responsibility frame ( $\chi^2 = 26.55$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). It was used more when the crisis type was in the preventable cluster (98.1% of preventable crises news) than in the accidental and victim clusters (79.2% of accidental crises news and 76.9% of victim crises news).

Significant differences in the use of the human interest frame were observed among the three crisis types ( $\chi^2 = 9.58$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .01$ ). News articles about crises in the victim cluster used the human-interest frame (92.3% of news stories about victim crises) more than they used it in accidental (83.3% of accidental crises news) and preventable (60.5% of preventable crises news) crises. More than three items of human-interest frame were used in 84.7% of stories about victim cluster crises, followed by 45.8% of preventable cluster crises, and 16.7% of accidental cluster crises.

Preventable crises news stories were more likely to use the conflict frame (use vs. no use; 70.5% vs. 29.5%), whereas 53.8% of stories about victim cluster crises used the conflict frame and no accidental crises news stories used it. The differences were statistically significant ( $\chi^2 = 46.24$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Significant differences in the use of the morality frame were observed among the three crisis clusters ( $\chi^2 = 27.73$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Preventable crises news stories were more likely to use the morality frame (use vs. no use; 51.9% vs. 48.1%) than stories about crises in the other clusters. Overall, accidental crisis news (use vs. no use; 95.8% vs. 4.2%) and preventable crisis news (use vs. no use; 74.8% vs. 25.2%) were more likely to use the economic frame. However, victim crises were less likely to use economic frame (use vs. no use; 38.5% vs. 61.5%). The differences were also significant ( $\chi^2 = 14.78$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

#### 4.3. Level of responsibility by crisis types (RQ3)

Overall, the news media focused on the organizational level of responsibility (56.6%) more than the individual level (47.4%). In terms of crisis type, this study found significant difference in using level of responsibility among crisis types ( $\chi^2 = 24.15$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (see Table 2). There is a clear distinction between accidental and preventable crises ( $\chi^2 = 24.13$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). All accidental crises news articles focused on the organizational level of responsibility, whereas preventable crises news articles were more likely to use the individual level of responsibility (52.9% vs. 47.1%). Significant difference was also found between victim and accidental crises ( $\chi^2 = 13.22$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The victim news was less likely to use the individual level of responsibility than the organizational level (46.2% vs. 53.8%), which is the opposite of the preventable crises.

#### 4.4. Five news frames by level of responsibility (RQ4)

This study found significant difference in the use of five news frames by level of responsibility. The attribution of responsibility frame was more likely to be used in conjunction with the individual level of responsibility (99.1%) than with the organizational level (91.5%) ( $\chi^2 = 7.71$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Likewise, the human-interest frame was more likely to be used in

**Table 2**  
Level of responsibility by crisis types.

Level of responsibility	Crisis types			Total
	Victim	Accidental	Preventable	
Individual level	6 (46.2)	0 (0.0)	111 (52.9)	117 (47.4)
Organizational level	7 (53.8)	24 (100.0)	99 (47.1)	130 (52.6)
Total	13 (100.0)	24 (100.0)	210 (100.0)	247 (100.0)

Note: Values in parentheses represent percentage.

conjunction with the individual level of responsibility (77.8%) than with the organizational level (52.3%) ( $\chi^2 = 17.42$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The morality frame was also more likely to be used with the individual level of responsibility (76.1%) than with the organizational level (16.9%) ( $\chi^2 = 87.06$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

However, the economic frame was more likely to be used with the organizational level of responsibility (87.7%) than with the individual level of responsibility (60.7%) ( $\chi^2 = 24.55$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .001$ ). There was no significant difference in the use of conflict frame.

## 5. Discussion

This study was aimed at identifying the use of crisis news frames by empirically analyzing various types of crises based on news coverage in 2006. We found that crisis news stories used news frames in the order of predominance: attribution of responsibility, economic, conflict, human interest, and morality. This finding is very similar to that of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000).

Not surprisingly, when reporting on a crisis, the news media tend to assign specific blame to the individual or organization and to attribute responsibility for the crisis to one or the other, in particular, in coverage of preventable crises such as organizational misdeed/mismanagement and misdeed with injuries. Thus, the news media are more likely to focus on attribution of responsibility in crisis situations in which there is strong controllability and intentionality on the part of the actor.

It is also not surprising that the economic frame is the second most frequently used frame in crisis news, considering that the sample of this study came from the business crises area. Yet, accidental crises news stories dealt mainly with the economic consequences. The recall crises of 2006 among large corporations (e.g., Sony, Apple, and Dell) might be the reason that the news media focused on the economic harm and its effect on the organization itself and consumers. The third most predominant frame, the conflict frame, was used more in a strike. The strike is a type of internal crisis, focusing on internal members' conflict between the dominant coalition and the employee members/unions. In terms of who is responsible for the crisis (strike), some may blame management and some may blame the unions. In this ambiguous situation, how the media assign blame for the strike could be important.

While Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) also found the economic and conflict frames to be predominant, the order of the two in their study was reversed. It is not surprising, however, given that the Semetko and Valkenburg's study involved political issues and this study looked at business crises. Our results are also consistent with their finding that the more "serious" the newspaper, the more likely the conflict and economic frames will be used. Considering that our sample involved only elite newspapers, and in particular two (*New York Times* and *Washington Post*) especially are known for their business/financial reporting, the possibility of bias exists in our sample.

Compared to the other three frames, the human-interest and morality frames are not frequently used in crisis news overall, but they are used predominantly in certain types of crises. For example, the human-interest frame was used in victim cluster news. In addition, we found that morality frames were used more frequently in preventable crises, which assume a high level of controllability and intentionality. If the news media emphasize moral and ethical aspects of a crisis, that may influence people's moral judgment toward the organization, which may in turn play a role in forming negative impressions and potentially negative behavioral action toward the organization.

Crisis news coverage was more likely to emphasize the organizational level of responsibility than the individual level of responsibility. If an executive of a company caused the crisis, the news media tended to stress the individual level of responsibility. But, if the actor was an employee, the news media was more likely to attribute responsibility to his/her organization. Thus, the media appear to assume that executives have control over the actions of an organization and should be held accountable for their ethical and moral lapses. The organization itself is freed of any responsibility. This allows the organization to paint itself as a victim too and not have to work so hard to distance itself from the wrongdoer. On the other hand, the media also appear to assume that the organization itself should be accountable for any errors on the part of lower-level employees.

Related to this, the use of level of responsibility was significantly different by crisis type. Given that preventable crises news stories were more likely to focus on the individual level of responsibility, it may be that people will attribute a low level of responsibility to the organization, because the news media tend to minimize organizational crisis responsibility through the individual level of responsibility frame. That suggests that people's perception about crisis responsibility may not be dependent on just simple crisis type, which SCCT assumes. Instead, the matter of crisis responsibility may depend on what news media portray about it.

The use of the individual level of responsibility frame is related to the attribution of responsibility, human-interest, and morality frames, while the use of the organizational level of responsibility frame is related to economic frame. In other words, when the news media assign crisis responsibility to individuals, they are more likely to say something about morality issues and include personal stories, stimulating emotion/mood. But when the news media attribute crisis responsibility to the organization, they tell people more about the economic effects of the crisis.

This study can provide practical insights for crisis managers and public relation researchers because it informs them of the news frames the media use to portray a crisis depending on type and the level of responsibility the media are likely to assign. They can use that information to more effectively design crisis response strategies. For example, the media are

most likely to assign responsibility to the organization when there has been an accident. And when the organization is responsible, the media are most likely to use the economic frame. In such situations, the organization may want to consider diminish or deal crisis response strategies. The public relations practitioner in such a situation would be wise to talk about what the organization does or will do in the future to avoid such accidents or crises and to refrain from blaming or appearing to blame the employee in any way. Also, they may want to put the economic consequences of the crisis into context.

If the crisis was preventable and caused by management, the media are most likely to blame the individual CEO and use the attribution of responsibility, human-interest, and morality frames. The organization itself may be freed of any responsibility for the crisis. This allows the organization to paint itself as a victim too. Here the organization can use denial strategies (the CEO operated alone, a few bad apples) to separate itself from those responsible. It can also use human-interest and morality frames in its own messages to garner public support. For example, it could focus on how its employees were affected by the crisis and on how the organization has been a good moral citizen in the past.

As limitations, this study used three elite newspapers as its sample, which may have resulted in the predominant use of the economic and conflict frame. In addition, the crises in ICM's 2006 report tended to be legal in nature. For example, in 2006 Merck was dealing with the lawsuits resulting from its Vioxx recall and not the recall itself, which meant the conflict frame appeared often. In addition, our sample is not representative of all types of crises because of the limited types of crisis cases in 2006. Studying different media outlets and different crises may well produce different results. Overall, this study aims to offer the first systematic review of crisis news frames with a hope of obtaining insights and directions for future research particularly as the field moves toward maturity.

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