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# Finding renewal in the midst of disaster: The case of the deepwater horizon oil spill

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## ABSTRACT

In 2010, the United States experienced the worst environmental disaster in its history. An explosion on a BP oilrig located in the Gulf of Mexico triggered the crisis. As a result, the United States coast guard and BP were charged with crisis communication in its response to the crisis. This essay provides an unprecedented examination and analysis of the communication experiences of public information officers who worked in the unified command center in Houma, Louisiana during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response. The authors use the discourse of renewal theory to understand the communication practices and choices of the public information officers. Then, using the renewal framework, the authors present three implications for improving crisis communication research and practice.

## 1. Introduction

On April 20, 2010, at approximately 10:00 PM CDT, the semi-submersible oilrig Deepwater Horizon exploded and caught fire (Transocean Ltd, 2010). Because of the explosion, 11 people died, and oil began spilling into the Gulf of Mexico. This event created a crisis and global media attention for the lease operator, BP Exploration & Production (BP). The incident demanded crisis communication from BP about how they were going to coordinate, manage, and communicate during the environmental disaster. The crisis communication during this event is unique because it was a joint effort between the United States Coast Guard, who was in charge of the cleanup and recovery and BP, who was responsible for the environmental disaster. In other response locations, the efforts of BP and the Coast Guard were divided into separate areas and coordination was minimized. Central to the crisis response were Public Information Officers (PIOs) who managed the crisis communication day to day.

This essay examines the crisis communication of PIOs working on the response in the Gulf of Mexico. PIOs worked in Joint Information Centers (JIC) in Miami, Florida; Mobile, Alabama; Houma, Louisiana; and Houston, Texas. We use focused interviews in this study to learn from the PIOs who worked throughout the crisis in Houma, Louisiana. Ultimately, we seek to understand the experiences, choices, and

communication approaches of the PIOs during the oil spill response and recovery efforts.

This study is valuable for three key reasons: First, it provides a rare opportunity to learn from practitioners who communicated during the largest environmental disaster in United States history (Baker, 2010, para. 2). Second, this study helps provide an unprecedented, insider view of the coordinated response and crisis communication decision making between the United States government and BP. Finally, this essay serves as an opportunity to understand how crisis communication theory and practice function during large-scale disasters.

In this paper, we describe the context of the oil spill and how PIOs fit into the structure of the response. Next, we provide an overview of crisis communication theory. Then, we explain how we collected data from the PIOs. Further, we offer the results of the PIO experiences and next engage in a discussion of these experiences in light of the crisis communication literature. Last, we provide three practical implications based on the findings and analysis.

## 2. Crisis in the Gulf of Mexico

### 2.1. Structure of the coordinated response

To respond to the crisis, the U.S. Coast Guard formed a partnership

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with BP, the responsible party (UPDATE 7, 2010). The Coast Guard was the regulatory authority for the response to the crisis. The Coast Guard and BP were supported by fifteen other agencies including the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Energy, and the Environmental Protection Agency, among others (RestoreTheGulf, 2010). The entire response was managed by a Unified Area Command (UAC) led by Admiral Thad Allen. The UAC was divided into four sectors and each sector was managed by a Unified Command (UC).

The UAC system provided a well-defined hierarchy for the response. Each of the four UCs reported to UAC in New Orleans. In Houma, the incident commanders were supported by an administrative advisory staff that consisted of a Joint Information Center (JIC), a community liaison office, security personnel, a legal team, and representatives from the various federal and state agencies taking part in the response. The hierarchy then branched into four major departments: Operations, Planning, Logistics, and Finance. Each branch reported to the incident commanders, who in turn reported to UAC.

Each UC had a JIC. The JIC was the central hub for all incoming and outgoing messages during the crisis response. PIOs played an important role in leading the JIC, setting communication priorities, and communicating with stakeholders during the crisis. In the JIC there was a head PIO from the Coast Guard, and a head PIO from BP. They worked together in the JIC throughout the response, though the BP PIO was subordinate to the Coast Guard PIO. In situations of disagreement about procedures or plans, the BP PIO would defer to the Coast Guard PIO. Within the JIC there were also a large number of individuals with expertise in the area of public relations and public affairs. Some of these communication experts were employed by the Coast Guard or BP, while others were brought in as contractors and consultants to assist in determining best practices for communication. These individuals supported the PIOs throughout the response.

## 2.2. The role of PIO

PIOs are communication coordinators. The position is commonplace in a wide variety of organizations including hospitals and police forces, as well as local, state, and federal agencies. These individuals are typically expected to be “spokespersons, or... advisers,” and they “perform media and public relations duties” (Mitzel, 2010, para. 1). PIOs may be expected to coordinate communication among various agencies, across multiple contexts, and for many different groups (ESPIOC, 2007; FCPIO, 2007; Reynolds, Galdo, & Sokler, 2002). Additionally, PIOs are expected to manage communication with stakeholders, including the public, during crisis situations. Both the Coast Guard and BP employed PIOs throughout the response. These practitioners managed media relations from around the world, provided crisis communication to different stakeholders, and coordinated communication for the JIC.

PIOs also have internal communication responsibilities. They coordinate communication throughout the command hierarchy during a crisis response. Crisis responses are often formulated through an Incident Command System (ICS) framework. The ICS framework:

is the systematic tool used for the command, control, and coordination of an emergency response. ICS allows agencies to work together using common terminology and operating procedures for controlling personnel, facilities, equipment, and communications at a single incident scene (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2006, para. 2).

The purpose of ICS is to allow responders from myriad agencies and organizations to form a coordinated crisis response. ICS is drilled by federal, state, and local agencies so that responders will have a common approach to managing a crisis (OSHA, n.d.).

Importantly, PIOs are sometimes also emergency managers. Emergency managers “gather information to analyze threats; share information; collaborate with all layers of government, businesses, schools, non-

profits, and residents; coordinate release alerts and warnings; plan and carry out evacuations; and develop and implement public education programs” (Littlefield et al., 2012, p. 246). While the duties of a PIO and an emergency manager often overlap, in this case the PIOs were not emergency managers. The PIOs in this case were Coast Guard officers and BP employees, and in this response neither set of PIOs acted in the capacity of emergency managers. The PIOs shared the communication responsibilities that emergency managers typically have, but did not carry any of the operational responsibilities that are typical for emergency managers (for example, none of the PIOs engaged in threat analysis, evacuation planning, or management of specific logistical issues related to the cleanup efforts). The PIOs were engaged almost exclusively on an array of communication functions, from coordinating with the media to engaging with local leaders to address questions and concerns.

## 2.3. The global response

When reflecting on the nature of BP’s response, globally, to the Deepwater Horizon spill, few would make the argument that the communication efforts surrounding the spill were successful. In the early days of the spill, BP was not accurate about the magnitude of the event (BBC, 2010). Later, there were a series of gaffes that left the public wondering whether BP’s leadership took the spill seriously. For example, in May, one month into the spill and following an (unsuccessful) attempt to seal the breach, BP sent an insensitive tweet apparently aimed at injecting levity into the situation (Lubin, 2010a, May 27). A few days later, then CEO of BP Tony Hayward famously said, regarding the spill and its disruptive nature on the lives of those affected, “There’s no one who wants this over more than I do. *I’d like my life back*” (Lubin, 2010b, June 2, para. 1, *emphasis added*). He apologized the next day via Facebook, though the apology is not what people remember today.

Beyond this series of unfortunate events, BP also received criticism for its use of paid media to begin telling its own version of the oil spill cleanup story (Cheney, 2010). BP ran a series of advertisements and sponsored posts on social media platforms explaining how clean and ready-for-tourists much of the Gulf still was. This was a departure from the type of messaging that occurred in previous oil spill cleanups – messaging that typically came only from official PIO channels and did not include promotional messaging (Cheney, 2010). While BP defended its right to tell its side of the story and highlight successes, this move left questions about the motivations and commitments the corporation was demonstrating.

The efforts BP took to improve its image during the spill response were not only criticized by commentators in the media – they were negatively assessed by scholars in the communication, management, and environmental disciplines. Kassinis and Panayiotou (2018) argue that BP used greenwashing to distract from the enormity of the disaster and its culpability and responsibility in the cleanup efforts. They argue that by using compelling visuals on their website and other digital media platforms, “the company aided in the formation of a new reality in the face of gross disaster” (Kassinis & Panayiotou, 2018, p. 41), and that these efforts contributed to BP’s restoration of its corporate image. Beyond the arguments of greenwashing, other scholars have been similarly critical of BP’s communication efforts. For example, Smithson and Venette (2013) critically examined BP’s congressional testimonies and found evidence of unethical stonewalling and attempts at minimization of the severity of the disaster. In a similar vein, Valvi and Fragkos (2013) highlight multiple failures in BP’s communication at a national and international level.

Up to this point, studies have been rightly critical of the global communication work of BP, particularly those efforts that occurred on the national and international scale. However, what has not been carefully considered by research to this point – in part because the data were simply not available – is the communication efforts of PIOs and

communication specialists at the local and regional level. The purpose of the current study is to shed new light on communication and public engagement efforts which occurred at the local and regional level at the UC in Houma, Louisiana. The current study will shed light on the communication efforts that have gone unnoticed up to this point, providing additional context for what has been a nearly universal one-sided exploration of how poorly BP communicated during the 2010 response.

#### 2.4. The response in Houma

As oil continued to vent into the Gulf, BP and the United States Government had a responsibility to communicate with stakeholders about the response and recovery operations. Engaging in crisis communication was instrumental to UAC's response and recovery efforts. PIOs working for each UC played a key role in providing the public and other stakeholders with the information they needed to maintain response operations. For instance, PIOs coordinated information sessions for the public, addressed media requests, and answered questions about response and recovery operations. Additionally, the JIC coordinated with local stakeholders to communicate about the value and risks associated with using dispersants, controlled burning, containment boom, and skimming. These efforts were designed to help stakeholders understand the purpose of the ongoing cleanup approaches.

For the individuals working in the JIC, life during the response was hectic and the work seemed unending. They worked under intense media scrutiny, with 24-h coverage of the event for the duration of the response. JIC members often went without sleep, working well past the end of the designated 12-h shift each day. They worked in a conference room filled with people, working long hours to answer calls, gather information, and distribute updates to those who needed the information. During press conferences, PIOs and other spokespersons became the target of verbal assault by members of the media and local leaders. Local leaders were understandably upset about the uncertainty of the response and its timeline. The stories of the interviewees paint a picture of a response center filled with individuals working to ensure a speedy recovery, and to meet the needs of local populations.

To understand what the current research suggests about crisis communication, the following section is an examination of relevant literature to identify and frame relevant research questions for this study.

### 3. Crisis communication theory

An organizational crisis is characterized "as a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and simultaneously present an organization with both opportunities for and threats to its high priority goals" (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2019, p. 7). Theories and research in crisis communication tend to fall into one of a couple of major philosophies or perspectives. One approach is built on a foundation of theory and research that emphasizes the critical nature of an organization's image or reputation in crisis communication (Benoit, 1997; Coombs & Halladay, 2002; Hearit, 2006). For instance, the image repair literature explains how post-crisis communication strategies can be used to repair the image of an organization following a crisis (Benoit, 1997). The apologia literature examines how organizations can and should apologize for transgressions or attacks that result in crisis and negatively impact an organization's image (Hearit, 2006). Situational crisis communication theory "evaluates the reputational threat posed by the crisis situation and then recommends crisis response strategies based upon the reputational threat level" (Coombs, 2012, p. 138). In each case, these theories provide communication strategies and guidance for repairing the image or reputation of the organization in the aftermath of a crisis. This research has a rich and long-standing tradition within the field of crisis communication. This research tradition is important because it

illustrates how many organizations respond to crises. These responses often involve denials of responsibility, minimization of the crisis, and shifting the blame away from the crisis-stricken organization. As Xu (2018) points out, "preoccupation over organizational image and reputation can backfire following a crisis because it gives an impression that the organization cares more about its self-interests than the well-being of the people" (p. 109).

A contrasting approach in crisis communication theory and research is characterized by theories that emphasize the importance of open, honest communication and developing strong stakeholder relationships (1997, Botan, 1993; Olaniran & Williams, 2001; Olaniran, Scholl, Williams, & Boyer, 2012; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2019). While each of these perspectives has merits, we selected the discourse of renewal (Ulmer et al., 2019) to understand the PIOs' communication experiences during the crisis. The discourse of renewal is a normative crisis communication theory that seeks to address the public's need for information about a crisis, learning from the event, and producing crisis communication that meets high standards of communication ethics (Xu, 2018). This paper examines the crisis communication choices BP and Coast Guard PIOs made during the environmental disaster. The goal of the PIOs during the crisis was to coordinate and distribute information internally, within the JIC and UC, and externally to various publics. For this reason, we felt the discourse of renewal theory was best suited to guide our interview questions, research questions, and to focus our results. The discourse of renewal seeks to better understand the choices that crisis communicators make and the actual communication they produce (see, for example, Sellnow, Iverson, & Sellnow, 2017; & Veil, Sellnow, & Heald, 2011). It also considers both internal and external communication choices and functions of crisis communication. What follows is a description of the four characteristics of discourse of renewal theory along with the research questions that directed our study.

Much research suggests that learning is vital to effective crisis management (Elliot, Smith, & McGuinness, 2000; Kovoor-Misra & Nathan, 2000; Mittelstaedt, 2005). The discourse of renewal divides organizational learning into four aspects: vicarious learning, organizational memory, learning from failure, and unlearning (Pyle, Fuller, & Ulmer, 2020). Pre-crisis, vicarious learning takes place through simulations, videos, training, or examinations of case studies. Vicarious learning is important, because "organizations can avoid crises by learning from other organizations' failures and crises" (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2019). The second learning type, organizational memory, is "an accumulation of knowledge based on the observation of successes and failures" by organizational members (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2019, p. 178). Organizational memory is vital for organizational success. The third type of learning, learning from failure, is a natural process in which an organization is able to observe its own mistakes and adjust for the future. The fourth area, unlearning, is the willingness of an organization to forego outdated practices. It is often challenging for organizations to unlearn, but unlearning is a valuable and often necessary aspect for overcoming a crisis. Prior studies focus on communication of learning rather than the self-report processes of learning by a communication team or organization. To better understand how learning affected the PIOs' crisis communication, the following research question is posed:

RQ 1: In what ways is organizational learning evident or absent in the reported communication experiences of PIOs in Houma, Louisiana, during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response?

Next, ethical communication consists of instituting strong positive organizational values, developing stakeholder relationships, and providing significant choice for stakeholders in crisis communication. Each aspect of ethical communication is crucial to an effective crisis response. First, organizations should determine appropriate values to guide their crisis response. For instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention use the values of "be first, be right, and be credible" to guide their crisis communication (Reynolds et al., 2002, p. 95). Second, organizations must also develop strong, healthy, and equitable

relationships with crisis stakeholders. These relationships should be characterized by honest and open dialogue about the crisis response and recovery operations (Ulmer, 2001; Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). Significant choice, the final component of ethical communication, is essential to managing any post crisis communication effectively (Ulmer & Sellnow, 1997). Significant choice is grounded upon the idea that crisis messages are “based on all the information available when the decision must be made... [and] includes knowledge of the alternatives and the possible long- and short-term consequences of each” (Nilsen, 1974, p. 45). Significant choice involves providing crisis information in an honest and complete manner. This approach enables stakeholders to make rational decisions about the crisis, including how to protect themselves. Few studies examine the internal processes of developing these external messages. As such, the second research question is posed to examine how the PIOs addressed ethical crisis communication during the response and recovery operations after the oil spill:

RQ 2: What standards of ethical communication are evident or absent in the reported communication experiences of PIOs in Houma, Louisiana, during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response?

Third, effective internal and external organizational rhetoric emphasizes framing, “structur[ing] a particular reality,” and coordinating information effectively for organizational stakeholders, including the public (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2009, p. 308). For instance, internally, organizations need to ensure a free flow of information by coordinating and sharing information and ideas effectively. Externally, organizations need to enact positive values, share information, collaborate with stakeholders, and structure a new normal for external crisis stakeholders. Effective external organizational rhetoric often involves inspiring stakeholders, building consensus, and establishing a commitment to overcoming the crisis (Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005). Few studies examine the self-report successes and failures of crisis communicators following an event. To consider the effectiveness of the internal and external organizational rhetoric by the PIOs during the crisis the following research question is posed:

RQ 3: What examples of organizational rhetoric are reported in the communication experiences of PIOs in Houma, Louisiana, during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response?

The final objective, prospective vision, involves crisis communicators maintaining optimism, being proactive, and focusing on the future (Ulmer et al., 2009). Essential to a prospective vision is being proactive. Organizations that have not engaged in pre-crisis planning are less likely to be able to handle the media and stakeholder scrutiny following a crisis. As a result, being reactive to a crisis typically involves the media and stakeholders setting the agenda for the crisis response. Conversely, a prospective vision involves a clear vision of how the organization wants to communicate and resolve the crisis. Few studies examine self-report discussions by participants about their communication choices. To see if and how the PIOs managed the important standard of maintaining a prospective vision, the following research question is posed:

RQ 4: What examples of prospective vision are evident or absent in the reported communication experiences of PIOs in Houma, Louisiana, during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response?

This section provided an overview of crisis communication theory, with a greater focus on the discourse of renewal. We explained why we selected the discourse of renewal, and then briefly defined each of the four components of the theoretical framework. We also delineated the four research questions for our study. The following section provides an explanation of our data collection and analysis.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Sampling

This project provided an unprecedented opportunity to conduct qualitative interviews with PIOs from the Coast Guard and BP that led the JIC in Houma, LA during the 2010 oil spill. Our sample was

deliberate, as we focused on individuals acting as communication leaders who managed all of the messages in Houma, LA throughout the crisis (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000). We were able to interview every PIO who worked a minimum of two weeks in the JIC. All of the PIOs we interviewed were involved in the response for a minimum of three weeks, and represent the leadership for the JIC during the entire crisis response. Our sample was exhaustive in that it represents the entire response timeline. To clarify this point, our interview participants, collectively, were present when the incident command post stood up in Houma, Louisiana in late April, were present throughout the entire response, and only transitioned away from Houma as the command post was standing down in mid-September. There is no part of the crisis response that our interview participants were not present at the JIC. The only PIOs we did not interview were those who were stationed in the JIC in Houma for less than one week, and whose experiences were therefore too limited to answer all the interview questions. Our total sample was (n = 7) PIOs. While this is a small sample, it represents perspectives from both BP and the Coast Guard that spans the entirety of the response effort.

Our sample provides an important opportunity to learn from the communication experiences of a specific type of individual in a unique and specific setting (Sengupta, 1996). The Deepwater Horizon crisis is currently the largest environmental disaster in United States history and the extended timeframe of the crisis makes the interview data from the PIOs involved both novel and valuable for learning and managing future crises of this nature. While there have been prior studies focused on the Deepwater Horizon crisis, other communication research about the response to this spill has been external and evaluative in nature (see for example Harlow, Brantley, & Harlow, 2011; Muralidharan, Dillistone, & Shin, 2011). This study breaks from previous work by offering firsthand perspectives of the PIOs, the communication specialists who worked day-to-day in the midst of the crisis response.

### 4.2. Procedures

We conducted focused interviews with the PIOs in order to understand their communication experiences while they were working in the JIC. The questions were developed from the discourse of renewal literature. Interviews were conducted on-site in Houma, LA, as well as by telephone. In total, we interviewed seven PIOs that either worked for the Coast Guard or BP and oversaw the JIC throughout the Deepwater Horizon crisis. An Institutional Review Board at our institution approved this project and each interviewee signed a consent form confirming their willingness to participate in our research. Each interviewee was assured total anonymity in the reporting of our data. To maintain anonymity in reporting, we have provided a pseudonym for each participant.

### 4.3. Interviews

The questions we asked dealt with the process of operating the JIC, communication strategies, how the regulatory authority (the Coast Guard) and the responsible party (BP) coordinated their work in the JIC, and how members of the JIC interacted with the media. We examined how the PIOs described their internal and external organizational communication processes. There was a total of 11 questions used for the interviews that were generated from the literature on the discourse of renewal, as well as best practices in crisis communication that are consistent with the discourse of renewal (Reynolds et al., 2002; Seeger, 2006). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min. We recorded and transcribed each interview. Data were collected from September 8, 2010, until December 6, 2010. Note: Publication of this research was delayed by the request of our interview participants, who sought to have both time and distance between themselves and the event before our data became public.

#### 4.4. Interview analysis

We used the discourse of renewal as a structure for developing RQs, as well as for presenting our findings from the analysis. We conducted a “theoretical” thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 10) in which our exploration of the data was driven by our interest in answering questions specifically about whether and how PIOs conducted themselves per the guidance of the discourse of renewal. We selected the discourse of renewal because the PIOs’ charge was not to manage the image or reputation of BP, but rather to coordinate and provide information to stakeholders. In short, the goal of this study was to use the discourse of renewal as a lens through which to better understand the communication practices of the PIOs.

We conducted a thematic analysis of the interview questions and organized the data according to the research questions delineated at the outset of the essay (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Downs & Adrian, 2004; Norton, Sias, & Brown, 2011). We attributed renewal-related codes to each section of transcribed data, either when reported communication behaviors were in line with the theory or when behaviors were in conflict with the recommendations of the theory. The analysis began with note-taking during the interviews, at which time we began noticing patterns across participant answers. We then transcribed the interviews by hand in order to further familiarize ourselves with the data. The process of interview and transcription was phase 1 of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Over several rounds of review and analysis, we developed clusters of themes and sub-themes based on the guiding framework of the renewal theory. This comprised phase 2 of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Data management was conducted manually, using hand-written notes on printed pages as well as post-it notes and comments in supplementary electronic data files (Saldana, 2015). We read through the transcriptions multiple times so that we could find consistent and divergent answers (Pettigrew, Miller-Day, Krieger, & Hecht, 2011). Through this process we were able to take specific stories and examples from participants and interpret them via the lens of the discourse of renewal. We then organized the data into themes and sub-themes, and reviewed them for consistency and accuracy which Braun and Clarke (2006) identify as phases 3 and 4 of the analysis process. Despite the small sample size, we saw saturation in our responses and had confidence in both the quality and depth of our interview data following the seventh interview (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). Lastly, we named the themes and reported our analysis, phases 5 and 6 of the analysis (per Braun & Clarke, 2006). Consistent with a theoretically-driven thematic analysis, we have structured the analysis based on the framework of the discourse of renewal. We outline the themes and sub-themes in the Key Results section below.

## 5. Key results

Before exploring the specific themes that arose in the analysis of data, it is important to acknowledge two meta-themes that developed through the analysis. These are themes that arose clearly through the reported data of all participants, but that do not fit within the discourse of renewal categorization of the other themes. The first is about the nature of the response in Houma. The Coast Guard PIOs have a very different set of responsibilities and constraints from the BP PIOs (see, e. g., Kim & Liu, 2012; Liu, Horsley, & Levenshus, 2010). However, because of the nature of the response and the decision to keep BP and the Coast Guard PIOs together in a single JIC, BP was beholden to the same high standard of communication to which the Coast Guard is held. One of the Coast Guard PIOs explained the nature of the relationship between BP and the Coast Guard in this way:

There were core differences between the ways we would handle something and they would handle something... BP is run like a business, we were run like a government. So BP oftentimes had

different ideas on how to do things than we did... There were two PIOs, and I’ve never been in a system before where there were two PIOs in one JIC. It did cause some conflict— especially when you had someone like me coming in who was at least 10 years younger than the other PIO, but had more experience and was well-known in the region... But most of the core disagreements in the JIC were because people were burnt out, people were tired... and I never disagreed with the other PIO in the JIC, the two PIOs would go off and talk on our own. We needed to present a unified front to everyone in the JIC. (Terry, Coast Guard)

As is explicated later in the discussion, the Coast Guard PIOs’ communication efforts were driven by the Coast Guard axiom, “Maximum disclosure, minimum delay.” Many of the BP PIOs indicated that this same axiom became a guiding value and philosophy for the entire JIC response team.

Secondly, there were many difficulties related to the scale of the response. For example, one problem that was often repeated was the challenge created by various elected officials “pushing their own agendas.” Another similar issue was the rampant rumors about the spill or the cleanup efforts, such as “a river of toxic oil just below the surface... that didn’t actually exist,” (William, BP) or “boats secretly spraying the coastline with chemicals at night” (Pat, BP). Another major concern related to the scale of the response was the size of the command chain, with potential communication failure at the local “frontline” level, the county or parish level, the regional command level, or at UAC in New Orleans. These challenges were a function of the scope of the disaster and the ongoing response efforts. Each PIO who had been involved in prior disaster responses, which included a variety of oil and chemical spills in the preceding two decades, reported that this response made each of their previous response experiences seem small, if not trivial. It would be difficult to overstate the impact the scale of the response had on the communication efforts and decisions of PIOs acting both for the Coast Guard and for BP.

Beyond the two meta-themes, there were seven clear themes that developed during the analysis. The following section is divided into four sections, one for each RQ. We restate each RQ and indicate the themes that address that RQ. Since the interview questions closely followed the characteristics of the discourse of renewal we were able to assess the relationship between the PIOs’ actual communication practices and the normative dimensions of the discourse of renewal. Each research question contained more than one theme. What follows is a presentation of the results of our findings, beginning with RQ<sub>1</sub>.

### 5.1. Organizational learning

RQ<sub>1</sub>: In what ways is organizational learning evident or absent in the reported communication experiences of PIOs in Houma, Louisiana, during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response?

There were two major themes that arose which helped answer this question. First, there were a number of pre-crisis mistakes or oversights that led to difficulties during the response. In addition to the need for a crisis communication plan, most of the PIOs indicated that they had very little formal communication training. Instead, most relied on “extensive experience in the field” (this quote from William, BP, captures the sentiment of several PIOs), though more than one indicated having “extensive public relations and public affairs training,” having “work [ed] in the public relations field for more than 20 years” (Raphael, BP – again captures the sentiment of multiple interview participants). This theme is situated in the larger category of organizational learning because of the need to unlearn ineffective practices, as well as the learning from failure that took place among the PIOs.

The second theme that developed was the PIOs’ expressed need to take better care of themselves and their teams. Every PIO who was interviewed indicated that they were working longer than the expected 12-h shift, often as much as 16–18 h days without taking time off. One

PIO recalled “one night I had to leave early, around 9:00, to go to the mall so I could buy new clothes. I just didn’t have time to wash anything” (Vernon, BP). This participant went on to describe his constant need to be connected to what was happening in the JIC:

When I got my first break I was like, “I want to see my wife,” but as soon as I got on the plane and didn’t have my Blackberry and didn’t know what was going on I was almost in a panic. When I landed in [State], and not being there and not being able to manage, to relax... It wasn’t that I didn’t trust people, but you start to feel that you’re so integral to what is happening that it’s hard to remove yourself. I would be more conscious of that. There was no reason to work a 33-h shift.

This theme is also tied to learning from failure and the need to unlearn ineffective practices.

## 5.2. Ethical communication

RQ 2: What standards of ethical communication are evident and absent in the reported communication experiences of PIOs in Houma, Louisiana, during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response?

In response to RQ<sub>2</sub>, there were two major themes that developed. First was the importance of meeting stakeholder needs. PIOs indicated that an important part of meeting stakeholder needs and building relationships was to bring local leaders into the UC and the JIC to see what the responders were doing on a daily basis. Tied to this was a shift early on in the response in the way that the PIOs connected with the public. At first, the PIOs attempted to host “New England style town hall meetings,” which unfortunately tended to devolve into “government bashing parties, BP bashing parties, whoever was closest” (Terry, Coast Guard). To address the problems of this type of meeting, they began using an “information expo” type meeting in which “people were able to sit down and have their questions answered.” These meetings allowed the PIOs to “sit down with people in small groups or one-on-one,” and although “it took them a while” to understand the value of bringing local leaders into the command center, “once we did it was awesome” (Kelly, BP). The PIOs also helped facilitate communication with stakeholders by drawing on the knowledge of subject matter experts (SMEs) and workers on the front lines of the response. As one PIO explained it:

At the end of the day I’m just a talking head. I’m not the person leading the operations or running the operations or cleaning up the shore or driving a ship. And if you really want to give media the real access then the best way to do that is by giving them access to the folks who really know what’s going on, whether that’s scientists or the guy picking up tar balls on the beach. (Kelly, BP)

This statement was an example used to emphasize PIO commitment to connecting local leaders and members of the media with the individuals best equipped to answer specific questions. They indicated that drawing on the knowledge and experience of SMEs helped to establish credibility, which was important in establishing relationships with stakeholders.

The second theme that developed was the importance of minimizing speculation. Several of the PIOs reported working under the Coast Guard axiom of “maximum disclosure, minimum delay,” and stated that the three elements of an effective crisis response are “honesty, integrity, and timeliness.” The Coast Guard PIOs influenced the views of the BP PIOs in this area, as the BP PIOs reported adopting these Coast Guard tenets as central to their own view of how best to proceed over the course of the response. They indicated the importance of “avoiding speculation and conjecture, but only relaying the information that was on hand” (Sam, Coast Guard). As part of this stance, the PIOs indicated that sometimes the only appropriate answer is “I don’t know.” Rather than stopping here, they indicated that an appropriate response in that situation is “I don’t know, but I’ll try to find out,” or that “I don’t know” was followed

by, “but here is what we do know” (Raphael, BP).

## 5.3. Effective organizational rhetoric

RQ 3: What examples of organizational rhetoric are reported in the communication experiences of PIOs in Houma, Louisiana, during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response?

Two themes developed in response to RQ<sub>3</sub>. First, the PIOs indicated that they were able to foster a “one-team mentality” by remaining unified in one JIC, rather than splitting into two separate JICs (as happened at other response locations). One PIO indicated that, although the situation was often frustrating, “internal politics didn’t come through as much” as they may have at other locations (Terry, Coast Guard). The PIOs also emphasized that the regulatory authority always demonstrated regard for the responsible party. They explained that the Coast Guard PIO, who was the JIC manager, and the BP head PIO “discussed disagreements in private.” For example, at one point a BP PIO “started trying to give some orders to [Coast Guard personnel], so I had to pull him aside and make sure he understood the chain of command and that he couldn’t give orders to my people” (Sam, Coast Guard). They also referred to the working relationship within the JIC as “close, collegial, professional, and actually kind of fun,” as well as “open and honest” and “productive” (Vernon, BP). They emphasized that not everything worked well, and there were people who “certainly did not get along” (Pat, BP), but that “at the end of the day, we’re all on the same team working for the same goals” (Sam, Coast Guard). One PIO went so far as to describe the relationship as “the joy of doing battle, meeting a challenge together, and fighting to reach a deadline” (William, BP). These points were emphasized in various ways by PIOs from both organizations.

The second theme that arose was difficulty and frustration regarding communication within UAC. The PIOs indicated that their updates, messages, and requests to UAC in New Orleans tended to go unanswered. They reached a point where, in their morning meetings, they would refer to UAC as the “Black Hole,” because “nothing we sent out would ever come back” (William, BP).

## 5.4. Prospective vision

RQ 4: What examples of prospective vision are evident and absent in the reported communication experiences of PIOs in Houma, Louisiana, during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response?

One major theme arose in relation to RQ<sub>4</sub>, which was the PIOs were reactive, yet were able to not fall behind in their communication. The PIOs each indicated that there was “no formal crisis communication plan in place” when the response began. This led to a situation in which “60–80 % of the time was spent being reactive,” and maintaining a proactive communication stance became quite difficult (Kelly, BP). Not only was there no solid strategic communication plan in place when they arrived, but each PIO indicated they helped to build a plan while they were in charge of the JIC. At the communication level, when one is trapped in a stance of reactivity, it is difficult to focus on building or maintaining prospective vision. Despite the reactive nature of their communication, there were a number of attempts at proactive communication. For example, one PIO indicated that although they did not have a written and solidly defined communication plan, they had an unofficial plan that consisted of three parts (Raphael, BP):

- 1 For the communication effort to seek to accurately and transparently convey to and through the media and other stakeholders what was going on operationally through the response.
- 2 To be as open, available, accessible, and cooperative with the media as possible.
- 3 To constantly stay in the modality of trying to be proactive.

This conceptual plan meshes with and matches the positions of the

other PIOs' responses to the question of what constituted a communication plan. However, the problem remains that the plan was neither official, nor was it written in a way that was accessible to all JIC members.

Additionally, the PIOs were proactive in communicating with local stakeholders about possible worst-case scenarios. They had meetings with local officials to discuss response plans in case, for example, "there was a hurricane during the response. We hope it won't happen, but if it does this is what you should do" (Kelly, BP). The PIOs helped build contingency plans for weather-related and other types of "worst-case scenarios."

In addition to each of these themes that helped to answer the RQs, a meta-theme developed which touched on each of the four RQs and built support for the use of the discourse of renewal as a normative crisis communication theory. Every PIO indicated that they, as well as the organizations they worked for, needed to expend time, energy, and money on effective crisis communication training. This is indicative of learning, as through the response they discovered what they did not know. It also indicates both ethical communication and organizational rhetoric, as these leaders were open about their need for communication training and their desire to understand high communication standards to help them lead more effectively. Finally, it draws on prospective vision, as they are planning for future crises.

Each of these themes arose through analyzing the interviews with PIOs. In the following section we use the discourse of renewal to better understand the data.

## 6. Discussion

The following section examines the relationship between the PIOs' self-reported crisis communication experiences and the four aspects of the discourse of renewal framework. Using the theoretical framework, we consider aspects of the PIOs' crisis communication that were effective, as well as those that can be learned from in future responses.

Before unpacking the themes, one surprising dimension was the way that the Coast Guard PIOs reported feeling as though they needed to be on the defensive with the public and members of the media. As one PIO explained (Sam, Coast Guard):

I hate to say it, but the Coast Guard is kind of spoiled, we're used to being the golden child. Look at Katrina, our last big response, we were the golden child. So all of a sudden to be taking a hammering and getting yelled at, people were getting worn out. Burning out really fast.

This is surprising in part because unlike BP, the Coast Guard had done nothing wrong and was not responsible for the disaster in any way. As mentioned previously, local stakeholders concerned for their lives and livelihoods would lash out at or begin "bashing" PIOs and spokespersons from both the Coast Guard and BP. This dynamic led to one of the core demonstrations of organizational learning the JIC members engaged in over the course of the response.

### 6.1. Organizational learning

According to the discourse of renewal, the four major areas of organizational learning are vicarious learning, organizational memory, learning from failure, and unlearning (Ulmer et al., 2019). Vicarious learning was evident within the JIC. Those JIC members that had received prior crisis communication training reported drawing upon their training throughout the crisis. One training lesson many PIOs found particularly important was to communicate "openly and transparently" as much as was possible. Not only did PIOs and JIC members draw on past experiences, they reported learning from one another and building on the successes of other JIC members. One of the Coast Guard PIOs set the tone for the response with the value position of:

Integrity, honesty, timeliness. I told [the JIC members], it's not my job to make you look good. It's my job to let the public know if something has gone wrong. We will do our job to fix it, but it's never my job to make you look good. (Sam, Coast Guard)

Multiple PIOs working for BP reported adopting the Coast Guard values stance and maxims in directing their own communication efforts, pointing to the Coast Guard's "maximum disclosure, minimum delay" axiom without prompting – suggesting that this axiom is something the BP PIOs internalized during their time working with the Coast Guard PIOs.

While there were successes in the area of vicarious learning and learning from failures, a major challenge for the JIC was developing or maintaining organizational memory. Because there was such a high rate of "people rotation and turnover" (William, BP) in the JIC, a portion of the work each week (if not each day) was training or re-training personnel who had just joined the JIC or who had rotated out of the JIC and come back onboard. Some people worked in "two week on, two week off rotations" (Vernon, BP) in the JIC. Other people worked for four days, and were then off for three days. The time that it took to train new JIC members or to bring returning members up to speed reduced the efficiency and overall organizational memory of the JIC. This turnover contributed to the reactive nature of the communication that PIOs experienced in the JIC.

One failure that each PIO mentioned that they wanted to learn from was to be more proactive in their crisis communication. Due to the barrage of communication inquiries and lack of adequate crisis planning, the PIOs reported being stuck in a reactive stance during the crisis. This was a challenge mentioned by every PIO we interviewed – and is something that many cited as a great failure in how the JIC engaged with stakeholders. Pat (PIO for BP) characterized the reactivity in this way:

[We attempted] to go from purely reactive JIC to one that was actually getting ahead or being proactive. We decided to be much more active in going into the community and sharing our messages before they were being asked, and it was very important that we had quick media monitoring, so it was very rigorous, and that was one of the issues is that we let things go too long without a response in the beginning, so I think yeah we became more strategic in that sense and became more proactive. I wish we had started that earlier.

This aligns with one of Choi's (2012) findings that messaging from BP during the response was consistently reactive. Each of the PIOs described efforts they made to shift their practices and communication to move from reacting to events toward a stance of proactivity. PIOs in future responses would benefit from internalizing the lessons found here, as a proactive stance and engagement is vital to building trust with stakeholders and working toward renewal.

JIC members also reported unlearning during their crisis communication activities. As one PIO pointed out, "There was a greater demand for information than there was capacity to get it out the door" (Terry, Coast Guard). To attempt to manage information flow more effectively, the JIC began hosting open houses for both the media and for local leaders. These gatherings were filled with locals who were anxious about their communities, homes, and livelihoods. Before long, these meetings were characterized by attacks on whoever happened to be speaking at the time. When the JIC members realized that the open houses were ineffective and became "government bashing" or "BP bashing" events, they changed methods. They began holding "information expo" type meetings in which people could sit down, share, and exchange information with PIOs, SMEs, the media, and other stakeholders in a less formal context. These meetings involved no formal agenda. Rather, they were designed to provide an open exchange of ideas between the public and UC. For this reason, information expos included information tables and poster board exhibits attended by knowledgeable SMEs, PIOs, along with UC representatives. Before long, community members, locals, and participants in these events began to

feel as though they were heard and were able to get information that they had felt was not accessible in the previous open house format.

Lastly, a major area where each PIO indicated a failure to unlearn ineffective practices was in how they took care of themselves. As has been extensively explored and discussed in academic research and in guidance from entities such as FEMA and the CDC, emergency responders regularly face burnout from overwork, exhaustion, and an inability (or occasionally a refusal) to stop working and take time to rest (see, for example, Benedek, Fullerton, & Ursano, 2007; Burnett & Wahl, 2015; Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, n.d.; & Pietrantonio & Prati, 2008). This dynamic was highly prevalent in the way that PIOs and other JIC members approached their work and communication behaviors. In hindsight, PIOs noted the problematic ways in which they would take on a greater burden than they should have – both in the work they were doing and in the hours they worked each shift. This aspect of the response is something that PIOs and responders should learn from in future responses. An aspect of training for this type of event should be instructive and guide how to best manage a massive, never-ending workload while also protecting the time, energy, and mental health of the individuals conducting the communication operations.

## 6.2. Ethical communication

Ethical communication is an important component of crisis communication. According to the discourse of renewal, the key concepts of ethical communication are organizational values, significant choice, and the importance of developing positive stakeholder relationships.

As it relates to organizational values, the PIOs in Houma reported maintaining the values of “honesty, integrity, and timeliness” in their crisis communication. The PIOs and other JIC members reported the importance of honesty and integrity in providing access to crisis information to all stakeholders. For instance, the previously-mentioned open houses were developed to have all stakeholder questions answered. This aligns well with Choi’s (2012) finding that BP made ongoing efforts to connect and work with local leaders on planning, preparation, and contingencies. They also allowed officials and members of the media to tour the command center and see the response operations firsthand. It was not uncommon to also have members of the general public meet with SMEs and other UC representatives to have their questions about the response and recovery operations answered. It also seems that, at least in some instances, the enacted values of the PIOs in Houma were out of sync with the broader values of BP at a national or international level. For example, the PIOs recounted several stories that suggest they were genuinely committed to working with and helping local populations prepare for and recover from the crisis. They also openly acknowledged the severe risks associated with the possible damage that both the oil and the chemical dispersants could cause along the coast and further inland in the event of a hurricane during the cleanup period. These reports stand in stark contrast to the values and communication that came from the broader organization earlier in the crisis. For example, as mentioned earlier in this manuscript, then-CEO Hayward demonstrated his own self-centered motivations and values with his insensitive commentary about wanting to “get his life back.” The reports of the PIOs also stand in contrast to the web visuals and advertising campaigns that BP ran which displayed clean, open beaches at a time when the cleanup and response efforts were still in full swing. These examples highlight a level of ethical communication present in the local response in Houma that was simply not evident in the broader national and international communication efforts, per the findings of other studies (see, for example, Kassinis & Panayiotou, 2018).

While there was a clear demonstration of ethical communication in the nature of PIOs’ engagement with local leaders, the PIOs reported the most difficult value to uphold was the value of timeliness of messaging. Many reported that the JIC’s inability to be proactive during its crisis communication was an impediment to achieving timeliness. One example of this is at one point in the response, information requests from

reporters were taking days to respond to rather than hours. The PIO in charge connected with a local reporter who was frustrated with delays in information:

He called and said, “What’s going on, you usually answer right away, what’s going on?” I was honest w/ him. I said look, I have the answer, I just have to clear it. I can’t have it show up in the paper tomorrow and have my boss ask, “Why didn’t you tell me this was coming?” So I was honest about fact that it was taking me longer. I admitted that fault, apologized, and by being upfront and honest it helped a lot. (Sam, Coast Guard)

This delay in messaging meant that, in the area of engaging with the media, there was a lack of significant choice. Significant choice is the idea that people must be given “the best information possible under the circumstances” (Nilsen, 1974, p. 46). Although messages were ultimately released, PIOs occasionally reported delays between receiving information and providing it to crisis stakeholders. More expedient crisis messaging increases significant choice for stakeholders and helps with their understanding of the crisis response and recovery operations.

Developing and maintaining close stakeholder relationships is vital to any crisis response. The discourse of renewal suggests that organizations should work before a crisis occurs to develop close relationships with stakeholders. This was possible with some of the PIOs, as they already had local connections and relationships to draw on (as with the example of the reporter in the previous section). In other instances, this required taking time to build trust over time by demonstrating consistency in messaging and delivering on promises. The PIOs reported that over time they were able to develop relationships with various stakeholders. Local stakeholders were brought into the UC so that they could see the response effort firsthand. Establishing the information expo sessions was another method that the PIOs used to develop relationships with stakeholders. Even though most of the PIOs could not rely on previously established relationships with stakeholders, they did report establishing relationships over time that resulted in a more effective response.

Perhaps the most interesting evidence of ethical communication in this response, which is also closely tied to the dynamics of organizational rhetoric, is the influence that the Coast Guard had on the nature of communication coming from the BP PIOs. The BP PIOs each indicated that they felt quite reactive on entering the JIC, and that they had to take time to figure out the values stance that drove their communication. The Coast Guard PIOs, on the other hand, were able to immediately point to the axioms and values positions that were driving their communication from the beginning of the response. This aligns directly with Ulmer et al.’s (2019) argument that crises do not build character, but rather reveal the existing character in an organization. What is important here, and we believe is directly tied to the nature of the relationships in the JIC, is that all but one of the BP PIOs indicated learning from and adopting the guiding ethical principles and values of the Coast Guard PIOs. If the JIC had been split and the two sets of PIOs had not been working together, or if the Coast Guard PIOs had not been so committed to upholding these values, this dynamic certainly would not have been present. Furthermore, we speculate that without the grounding ethical foundation of the Coast Guard PIOs’ values, the nature of these data and the responses of the two groups of PIOs would have been quite different. Despite the conflict and challenges the two groups faced and had to overcome, the boundaries provided by the Coast Guard PIOs’ values shaped the communication and outcomes of the local and regional response in positive ways.

### 6.2.1. The ethical elephant in the room

As has been broadly discussed and explored, much of BP’s response at the national and international scale as described in the extant literature ranged from moderately unethical to outrageous lies and deception (Kim, 2015; Veil, Sellnow, & Wickline, 2013; Verschoor, 2010).

However, we stand by our assessment of this microcosm of the broader response in arguing that many aspects of the response in Houma were marked by ethical communication and a commitment to hold to organizational values. Kim (2015) offers a careful assessment of the ethics of BP's communication based on a review of others' findings and news reporting during the event. Kim's (2015) assessment employs the TTR model of communication ethics – Transparency, Two-way communication, and Right time.

Kim found that BP violated all three of the measures for ethics – the organization was not transparent and employed unnecessary ambiguity in its communication. In contrast to that, the PIOs in Houma reported ongoing efforts to increase transparency, draw in external stakeholders, and increase information flow. Our data point to a reasonable amount of transparency based upon the self-report data of the PIOs directly engaged in the response in Houma, particularly compared to the broader organization's communication.

Secondly, Kim found that BP did not engage in two-way communication. In Houma, however, PIOs brought in local leaders and journalists to speak with responders and subject matter experts involved in the response. On this measure as well, based upon the experiences of those directly involved, the response in Houma appears to have been much more ethical and consistent with two-way communication than is described by Kim and viewed in the broader communication by BP.

Lastly, the question of Right time – how timely was the communication during the response? Kim found that BP delayed and remained silent with audiences across multiple channels. In Houma, while each PIO indicated a range of efforts to stay connected to stakeholders, they each reported failures in the timeliness of their communication. Therefore, on the measure of Right time, the response in Houma seems to have matched with the broader BP response – if for different reasons. Therefore, we argue that the response in Houma was a much more effective and ethical than was seen by the broader BP response. This is almost certainly attributable, in large part, to the dynamics of keeping BP and the Coast Guard PIOs together and working as part of a unified JIC.

### 6.3. Effective organizational rhetoric

According to the discourse of renewal theory, effective organizational rhetoric refers to the responsibility of leaders to communicate effectively both internally to the JIC structure, and externally to their publics during a crisis. During the response, PIOs reported not communicating well about the need for internal stakeholders to rest. Shifts in the command center were supposed to change every 12 h, yet for most of the response people were working 16–18 h shifts. The PIOs failed to communicate to other JIC members the importance of taking time to leave the JIC and rest so that they could come back rejuvenated. Because PIOs did not communicate internally about their need for rest, or externally about their need for help, JIC members often worked with less sleep than they needed and more work than they could handle. In this case, the PIOs reported clearly having failed in maintaining effective organizational rhetoric. PIOs and JIC leaders in future responses would benefit from recognizing the important value in this hindsight admission – despite their own belief, at the time, that they were indispensable, each PIO indicated that it was neither wise nor beneficial to continue attempting to engage as JIC participants beyond the expected timeline of their respective shifts.

Although there were challenges to communication within the JIC, there were also examples of internal coordination. The data suggest that the PIOs in Houma were able to communicate a “one-team” mentality that helped them work together rather than separately. In Houma, the Coast Guard and BP remained together in one JIC. All of the PIOs reported that despite the potentially contentious nature of their relationship, everyone “basically left politics at the door” and “at the end of the day we were on the same team working for the same goals” (Pat, BP). Had the JIC in Houma been split, it is likely that they would have been

less effective in managing communication challenges. Their proximity enabled them to tackle challenges together.

The JIC did not have a clear plan to follow for the duration of the response. More than one PIO mentioned that they did not follow the ICS guidelines for the response and reported that there was no internal or external communication plan. Internally there were difficulties in messaging within the hierarchy, and the JIC in Houma felt like their requests were never answered by UAC in New Orleans. Even if UAC had received what they needed, Houma was left without confirmation. Externally, the data illustrates that the JIC had no plan in place to manage communication, which left the JIC in a reactive stance. This reactive stance did not enable PIOs the opportunity to motivate external stakeholders or create a reality of growth and renewal as effectively as might have been possible.

### 6.4. Prospective vision

According to the discourse of renewal theory, the fourth and final part of achieving renewal is maintaining prospective rather than retrospective vision. During a crisis response, it is important for leaders to communicate optimistically, to focus on the future, and to work toward renewal rather than trying to place blame. One major issue that inhibited the efforts of PIOs and other JIC members to maintain prospective vision was the lack of a substantial communication plan for being proactive and developing a prospective vision for the response. As mentioned previously, Kelly (PIO for BP) stated “there was no communication plan in place when I arrived;” they went on to estimate that “between 60–80 % of our time was spent being reactive.” The JIC was largely unable to be proactive in getting messages out about the response before new events would take place. According to the discourse of renewal, the concept of prospective vision is about maintaining focus on the future (Ulmer et al., 2019). Without established plans, guidelines, or a general philosophy for communication during a crisis, organizations remain largely reactive. If an organization cannot shift to a proactive stance, then prospective vision cannot be achieved.

Although there were challenges to maintaining focus on the future, the PIOs reported communicating with optimism and looked to renewal rather than trying to place blame. The data indicate that during the response PIOs communicated with local officials with realistic optimism. They acknowledged the potential for long-term damage in the gulf as a result of the oil spill, but showed members of local communities exactly how they were planning and preparing so that the environmental impact could be minimized. They also discussed the potential damage that could result if a hurricane moved through the area before the cleanup was complete. As one PIO reflected on the question of planning and dealing with “what if” questions:

[We responded] quite directly, “What if we have a hurricane and it moves all the oil on shore? What are you going to do about it?” Well, here's the plan. “What if we have a hurricane, what are you going to do with your ships?” A lot of that we were trying to manage by having a plan for it, we were trying to understand what the different scenarios were and how that would impact our operations and public safety, and we were putting plans in place to deal with [contingencies] before they ever happened. (Kelly, BP)

The JIC members created contingency plans for the worst-case scenarios so that they could be prepared to manage further crises.

Without question, there were failures in the local-level response efforts of the PIOs in Houma. While the communication efforts were by no means perfect, the converging responses of both BP and CG PIOs offer a strong indication that the JIC members made genuine efforts at transparent, ethical communication that is in-line with the guidelines of the discourse of renewal. These findings stand in contrast to the findings of related work about other aspects of this disaster by Kassinis and Panayiotou (2018) or Smithson and Venette (2013).

This section addressed the self-reported crisis communication experiences of the PIOs during the response. The following section consists of three implications for PIOs, organizations, and other responders in future large-scale crisis responses.

## 7. Implications for crisis communication

This study examined the unprecedented response by crisis communicators charged to respond to the largest environmental disaster in United States history. The results and discussion of this study emphasize the importance of organizational learning, collaboration, communication ethics, and proactive internal and external communication processes. This study yields three implications for crisis communication theory and practice. The following implications focus on organizational communication processes that can enhance future responses to large-scale crises.

### 7.1. The importance of effective crisis preparation and training

The most significant implication of this essay is the importance of crisis communication skills. Our society is routinely affected by a wide variety of crises, from communities damaged by wildfires to livelihoods lost to economic downturn. The literature is replete with examples of ineffective and maladaptive responses to the difficult context of communicating during a crisis. Individuals and organizations can benefit from building skills in effective crisis communication. Every PIO we interviewed reported wishing they had a crisis plan in place and significant training in advance to aid their response capacity. Those PIOs that had received some crisis training reported relying on that training extensively during the event. Extensive, ongoing training and development in crisis communication is essential for high-risk organizations like those in the oil industry. Individuals and organizations build their capacity to manage a crisis by learning knowledge and skills over time. Organizations are much better off learning vicariously from other organizations pre-crisis compared to trying to learn while managing a crisis.

However, few organizations are prepared for communicating during a crisis. The discourse of renewal suggests that crisis planning and training should involve understanding crisis choices between emphasizing the threat and opportunity during a crisis, clarifying organizational and crisis communication goals and values, building positive relationships with stakeholders over time, developing conflict management and resolution strategies, and capitalizing on vicarious learning opportunities through the examination of case studies and conducting crisis simulations. By understanding the unique context of crisis communication and building expertise and understanding about how to communicate, organizations can be much more proactive and confident in their crisis communication. However, crisis planning and training should not just involve internal organizational stakeholders.

Building external relationships among key stakeholders is also a vital aspect of developing an effective crisis response. Before the Oklahoma City bombing occurred in April of 1995, Governor Keating worked to develop relationships among various key stakeholders in areas that were vital to the rescue and response efforts. Because relationships had already been developed, responders were able to work together more effectively (Reynolds et al., 2002). Aaron Feuerstein, owner of Malden Mills also regarded stakeholder relationships as critical to his response to a plant fire at his mill (Ulmer, 2001). Finally, Schwan's Sales Enterprises relied heavily on pre-established stakeholder relationships to respond to their salmonella outbreak (Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998). Future crisis planning in the oil industry should engage communities about response and recovery operations including the use of dispersants, burning, booming, and other health and human safety issues before a crisis. Issues of how to communicate about these response and recovery operations should be central to crisis planning. In short, organizations that wish to communicate effectively in a crisis would do well to prepare

by building communication skills through learning, developing strong positive crisis communication values and goals surrounding areas of risk, and developing strong positive stakeholder relationships.

### 7.2. A normative theory for understanding crisis organizing processes and responses

Although the literature in crisis communication provides a clear understanding of how organizations currently communicate during a crisis, we have few normative theories of crisis communication (Xu, 2018). Much of the crisis communication research focuses on failures in communication rather than on opportunities for success or effectiveness. The discourse of renewal is distinct in that the theory recommends organizations resist the temptation to focus on image and reputation in crisis communication. Examples such as Malden Mills, Schwan's, Cole Hardwoods, Odwalla, Cantor Fitzgerald, among others suggest that the discourse of renewal provides a useful normative approach to crisis communication theory and practice (Reiersen, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2009; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Seeger et al., 2005; Ulmer, 2001; Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2019).

This theory provides a way for researchers and practitioners to focus on crisis communication processes over outcomes. The crisis communication literature needs more normative theories of crisis communication that provide clear guidance about how to communicate well during a very difficult context. This essay illustrates how the PIOs during the Deepwater Horizon response succeeded and failed to engage in other parts of the discourse of renewal process. PIO reports suggested that they succeeded by setting sound communication values, learning from their experiences, and practicing honest and open communication. Conversely, they report falling short of establishing a prospective vision for the crisis response, maximizing their internal communication effectiveness under the UAC, and learning and preparing as thoroughly as possible before the crisis. Future research should continue to develop and test normative theories for effective crisis communication.

### 7.3. Correcting the threat bias in crisis communication

Finally, the discourse of renewal emphasizes mindfully considering how we define crises. Crises are routinely characterized by surprise, threat, and short response time, or as "low probability/high consequence events that threaten the most fundamental goals of an organization" (Weick, 1988, p. 305). These definitions have been central to the research and practice of crisis communication for the past 50 years. Much of the focus on threat in the crisis communication literature emphasizes threat to the image of the organization. We argue that how we symbolically define crisis has an impact on how we act in a crisis. For this reason, we need to expand definitions of crisis to include both threat and opportunity to the fundamental goals of the organization. In this case, the crisis communication practitioner should be aware of the consequences of focusing on the threat or the opportunities associated with the crisis.

Consider if the PIOs involved in BP's crisis communication in the Gulf of Mexico emphasized protecting the image of the company over opportunities to provide information to stakeholders about response and recovery operations. For BP and Unified Command to focus on threat to its reputation or on itself in any way would have been counterproductive and would have intensified the crisis for itself and its stakeholders as we saw with the initial ill received responses by CEO Tony Hayward (Lubin, 2010a, June 2). Any persuasion used unethically to shift blame away from BP or to minimize the crisis would have certainly made the crisis worse for all involved. Conversely, using the crisis as an opportunity to provide open and honest communication to stakeholders about the crisis, communication regarding lessons learned, and a prospective vision for moving the organization forward are useful and productive approaches to crisis communication. These normative crisis communication processes, described in the discourse of renewal, are essential to

improving crisis communication practice. However, organizations that fail to see the opportunities in defining crises and focus excessively on the threat of the crisis are likely to leave these opportunities dormant and hidden from view.

## 8. Conclusion

Public Information Officers have the difficult task of coordinating communication among many disparate groups during a complex and difficult crisis situation. They must ensure stakeholders, the public, the media, and crisis management personnel are all able to remain updated and connected during a crisis. The purpose of this paper was to analyze the communication experiences of PIOs during the Deepwater Horizon oil spill response in order to develop implications for PIOs in future responses. The PIOs had an incredibly challenging task, and our research revealed both successes and failures in their reported communication during the response. While the global response was marked by failure and frustration, we found many areas of effective and successful communication in the local and regional response. Future research should continue to address the effectiveness of PIO crisis communication practices. This study provided an excellent opportunity to learn and prepare for the next crisis event. Ultimately, crises are going to continue to happen. Organizations and PIOs must be trained in crisis communication theory and practice. PIOs need a strong foundation of theory to guide their communication practice and to ensure they are properly equipped to manage crises effectively.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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