Crisis Communication Response and Political Communities: The Unusual Case of Toronto Mayor Rob Ford

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ABSTRACT Researchers have examined the efficacy of crisis response strategies, which are intended to maintain or gain legitimacy after a serious incident. However, the video allegedly showing Toronto Mayor Rob Ford smoking crack provides an interesting case that reveals a blind spot in political crisis response theory: the factor of partisan community. This article suggests that crises should be seen not as types but as breaks in the discourses of communities. Ford’s response was not an example of poor crisis communication response because he acted in ways that were acceptable within his partisan community. The article suggests that crisis communication researchers and practitioners must first understand the norms and values of the political community in question before selecting crisis response strategies.

KEYWORDS Crisis communication; Public relations; Political communication; Risk communication; External communication

RÉSUMÉ : Les chercheurs ont depuis longtemps examiné l’efficacité de stratégies employées pour répondre à une crise. Ces stratégies ont comme objectif de maintenir ou obtenir la légitimité d’un organisme ou d’un individu à la suite d’un incident grave. La vidéo montrant prétendument Rob Ford, le maire de Toronto, en train de fumer du crack représente un cas intéressant, car il révèle une lacune dans la théorie sur la gestion de crises politiques : le facteur des communautés partisanes. Cet article suggère qu’il faudrait envisager les crises comme étant des ruptures dans les discours communautaires plutôt que des types de discours communautaire. Dans cette mesure, la réponse de Ford n’était pas un exemple de communication de crise médiocre, parce qu’il a agi de manière acceptable pour sa communauté partisane. Cet article suggère que les chercheurs et pratiquants en communication de crise devraient d’abord comprendre les normes et valeurs de la communauté politique impliquée avant de choisir une stratégie pour gérer une crise.

MOTS CLÉS : Communication de crise; Relations publiques; Communication politique; Communication de risque; Communication externe

Introduction

On May 16, 2013, John Cook of Gawker.com posted the startling news that he had viewed a cellphone video of Toronto Mayor Rob Ford smoking what looked like a crack pipe. Shortly after Cook’s report, Toronto Star journalists Robyn Doolittle and

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Kevin Donovan reported that they too had seen the video. The news dominated Toronto media for months.

The day after the news broke, reporters stood outside Ford’s home and asked him for a response to this potentially devastating political crisis. Ford called the allegations “ridiculous” but provided no further comment before leaving in his SUV (Loriggio & Perkel, 2013). In each of the following few days, reporters camped in the hallway outside his City Hall office hoping to get a more fulsome response, but he avoided them by entering his office through a back door. In the meantime, the crisis became fodder for late-night talk show hosts Jon Stewart, Jimmy Kimmel, and Jay Leno (Magi, 2013). The story went not just national but also international (“Canada’s political scandals ...,” 2013).

The crisis continued unabated for almost six days when Ford’s brother, Toronto councillor Doug Ford, held a press conference denying the allegation on his brother’s behalf. He told reporters that “Rob is telling me these stories are untrue, that these accusations are ridiculous, and I believe him” (Dhillon & Daugherty, 2013, p. A7). In addition, Doug blamed the two Toronto Star journalists, calling it “questionable reporting from a news outlet that has proven they would do anything to stop the mayor’s agenda” (DiManno, 2013a, p. A2).

Despite the Fords’ focus on the Star, criticism also came from politicians and columnists across partisan sides and media outlets. Doug’s crisis communication surrogacy caused even Rob Ford’s friend and deputy mayor Doug Holyday to question the efficacy of their communication strategy (Dhillon & Daugherty, 2013). Globe and Mail columnist Marcus Gee (2013) called the public relations strategy typical of the Fords: “When the Fords are under attack, their practice is to dodge the hard questions and blame the media. So it was on Wednesday, with Rob Ford doing the dodging and Doug the blaming” (p. A7).

A week after the story broke, Ford had yet to directly and forcefully deny the allegation, which drew criticism from public relations commentators. Crisis communication expert Robin Sears criticized Doug Ford’s comments and the brothers’ overall strategy as “among the worst damage control limitation statements I have seen in 40 years of watching this kind of work” (Coutts, 2013). Even Rob Ford’s former press secretary, Toronto Sun comment-page editor Adrienne Batra, complained that Ford’s avoidance strategy was just “too much silence” (CP24, 2013b). Batra judged that his silence “has created a vacuum, and that vacuum is being filled by the likes of us and his political opposition” (Dale, 2013a, n.p.).

Finally, on May 24, eight days after the crisis began, Ford held a press conference and said, most notably, “I do not use crack cocaine, nor am I an addict of crack cocaine. I cannot comment on a video that I have never seen or does not exist” (Church, 2013). Despite his apparent openness in speaking to the allegation, his response garnered criticism for the way it skirted around the issue (DiManno, 2013b; James, 2013).

After the press conference, journalists slowly decamped from Ford’s City Hall office, but questions lingered throughout the summer. Ford’s crisis response strategy would change drastically after new information was reported: Toronto’s Police Chief Bill Blair revealed that the police force had secured the crack video in its longer-term
investigation of Ford and a Ford associate named Sandro Lisi, who had been charged
with extortion (Jones, 2013). Ford again waited a few days to respond before surprising
journalists during a scrum by finally admitting to using crack cocaine: “Yes, I have
smoked crack cocaine. But no, do I, am I an addict? No. Have I tried it? Probably in
one of my drunken stupors, probably approximately about a year ago.” He added, “All
I can do now is apologize and move on” (Dale, 2013b).

This 180-degree turn in crisis response strategy—an incoherent strategy widely
discouraged in the academic literature (Benoit, 1997b; Hay, 1995; Ihlen, 2002; Ulmer,
2001)—further raised Ford’s profile. CNN sent a reporter to interview Ford and even
created a special section for coverage on the “Mayor Ford Controversy” (Weir, 2013).
Ford was lampooned on the comedy show Saturday Night Live, and he even visited
Kimmel in Los Angeles for an interview, cementing Ford’s worldwide pop culture status
(Bateman, 2014; Kennedy, 2013).

The allegation of the existence of the crack video sparked the crisis, but Ford’s crisis
response became the next, and perhaps more important, story. The crack video incident
is significant and worthy of study as an important case of public relations crisis com-
unication for two reasons. First, the case is important because of the serious allegation
made towards a public figure. Public figures are not expected to engage in illegal be-
haviour. The video was also tied up in a larger story of gangs and drugs—weeks after
the allegation surfaced, Toronto police launched raids that targeted people related to
the video (Poisson & Donovan, 2013). In addition, the crack video became widely
known; locally, 96% of Torontonians who were polled knew about it. Forum Research
president Lorne Bozinoff noted the significance of this widespread knowledge:

You could never get that awareness on commercial media. Nothing like
that ever happens so that is huge. This is a huge story there is no doubt
about it. Everyone is following it—for sure they all know about it, everyone
has an opinion on it. (Peat, 2013)

Second, the case is important because of how Ford responded to the crisis. Public
relations practitioners contacted by journalists roundly criticized his response; this
criticism is analyzed below. The results of the incoherent crisis response strategy tell
us something important not only about Ford and political communication, but also
about crisis response strategies and crisis communication theory.

This article analyzes the case of the Rob Ford crack video in detail, not to present
a case of poor political crisis communication, but rather, to argue that Rob Ford’s initial
crisis response makes sense, even though scholars have typically argued that avoidance
and denial are not effective strategies when accused, particularly if the truth eventually
becomes known (Benoit, 1997b; Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Brinson & Benoit, 1996;
Hearit, 1994; Legg, 2009).

This case reveals, most importantly, a problem not specific to Ford’s response, but
rather with popular crisis response strategies, like openness and apology, more gener-
ally. This article outlines the literature on crisis response in order to understand how
strategies are defined and tested, and then it considers a blind spot in crisis communi-
cation literature that contextualizes Ford’s crisis response more carefully, namely, the
notions of discourse and community. Unlike other types of crisis responders, politicians choosing response strategies cannot be slaves to one strategy on the advice of public relations practitioners and scholars; instead, politicians must consider strategies in light of multiple and often opposing political communities.

**The study and choice of crisis strategies**


Benoit’s (1997b) goal has been to determine the best message responses to prevent image damage and to repair images after a crisis. In the same vein, Coombs’ (1995) work attempts to “create guidelines for the use of crisis-response strategies” (p. 448). The goal, Coombs argues, is that the “response should seek to soothe the publics, not to antagonize them further” (p. 459).

Going beyond the emphasis on corporate crises in the field of crisis response, Benoit has focused a great deal of attention on political crisis communication response. In one of the earliest crisis communication articles on the subject, Benoit (1982) looks at U.S. President Richard Nixon’s response to Watergate. He shows how Nixon’s inconsistent and defensive strategies, such as shifting blame and refocusing attention, did not work according to declining poll results. Benoit also analyzes a serious case of the 1969 death of Mary Jo Kopechne, a passenger in a car driven by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, who survived the single-car accident. Kennedy took responsibility for her death and quickly apologized, which Benoit (1988) assesses as effective in influencing public opinion. More recently, President George Bush has provided a number of cases for Benoit. He has looked at Bush’s crisis response to the Iraq war and economic problems facing America, among other issues. In his crisis responses, Bush was always defensive and sometimes inconsistent, and Benoit argues that he failed to improve his public image (Benoit, 2006a, 2006b; Benoit & Henson, 2009).

Benoit (1997b) outlines five main categories of possible crisis response strategies: denial, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. Coombs (1995) expands on Benoit’s work, dividing the whole range of possible responses into five categories: Nonexistence Strategies, Distance Strategies, Ingratiation Strategies, Mortification Strategies, and Suffering Strategy. Within these categories, some of the strategies a PR professional may employ include denial, attack, minimizing the injury, denial of intention, bolstering, and transcendence, among others (Coombs, 1995, 1998, 1999a, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). In the Ford video case, Rob Ford denied, avoided, and then expressed mortification. Doug Ford denied, bolstered, and attacked.

Beyond classifying or mapping out possible responses, researchers test these strategies to determine their efficacy. Through this testing, researchers want to move crisis communication towards a scientific orientation. In this way, crisis communication’s common professional and practical wisdom comes under the scrutiny of the scientific process—sometimes that wisdom proves effective and sometimes it does not. For ex-
ample, Coombs and Schmidt (2000) have tested Benoit’s case-study research and, to some degree, found support for those findings. Constructed scenario experiments are often used to assess crisis response strategies quantitatively. Researchers create mock texts of crisis communication responses and survey large populations, often students, to determine the effectiveness of various communication strategies (Coombs, 2004a; Dean, 2004; Sheldon & Sallot, 2008).

A consensus has emerged in the literature about some crisis response strategies. Denial does not work (Bradford & Garrett, 1995; Hearit, 1994; Legg, 2009). Denial only prolongs a crisis, making the damage worse (Brinson & Benoit, 1996). Accepting responsibility is effective (Bradford & Garrett, 1995). Mortification (full apology) works well as a way to reduce damage and move on from the response stage (Coombs, 2011; Hearit, 1999, 2005; Ihlen, 2002; Legg, 2009; Sheldon & Sallot, 2008).

The crises considered in the studies cited above are diverse: a religious celebrity’s sexual transgression, a politician’s controversial words, a corporation’s response, a car company’s product failure, and a health company’s failed breast implants. The problem for PR practitioners, however, is that this seemingly wide applicability and consensus may lead to an uncritical application of these strategies. In other words, PR practitioners may feel that the similar research findings on crisis response in these studies prove that one should always choose to respond with, for example, apology.

This research consensus on strategic options is also evident in the advice public relations professionals gave during the Ford crack video crisis. Robin Sears criticized Ford’s avoidance: “In the court of public opinion you will always be convicted for refusing to say something in your own defense … But silence and denial is not going to cut it” (CP24, 2013a). Sears felt the response violated essential principles of crisis communication:

> It’s kind of like Communications Strategy 101. This is going to go into the textbooks of how not to do something like this. He will not be able to appear in a public place without being, as Doug says, “harassed” by the media from now until he does [speak]. (Dale, 2013a, p. A1)

Scott Reid from Feschuk Reid Communications said Doug Ford’s crisis communication in this case only “exacerbates and irritates the situation” (Dhillon & Daugherty, 2013, p. A7). Reid added that “until the mayor comes forward and says, ‘This is untrue, it’s not me, it could never be me,’ then this is all going to be ridiculously unsatisfactory” (Dhillon & Daugherty, 2013, p. A7). Sears additionally suggested that the strategy of apology was Ford’s only option after the crack video news surfaced:

> When you’re caught in a situation that involves a behaviour as a public official that angers voters, the first place you have to start is apology. You can’t go anywhere before apology. Because unless and until you say I recognize the embarrassment this has caused, I recognize the blot on Toronto’s reputation this story has created, I apologize for that, people are not going to listen to what you say after. (CP24, 2013a)

Interviewed shortly after Rob Ford’s May 24 press conference, PR consultant Atul Sharma from Hill + Knowlton Strategies assessed the total response, from start to finish. Sharma said:
In theory, being visible and addressing the allegations is the right approach and not letting them linger and not addressing them for a week just continues to fuel speculation. Our counsel would be to stick to the substance of the issue and focus on that rather than ... attacking the media and people who are writing the stories. (Alamenciak, 2013a, p. A12)

After the November bombshell, Daniel Tisch (2013) of Argyle Communications argued that, had Ford come clean when the allegations first surfaced in May, admitted his problems, apologized and taken a leave of absence, many would have forgiven the drug and alcohol abuse and suspended judgment on the other matters pending criminal proceedings. (n.p.)

The academic crisis response literature backs up these professional commentators’ assessments. Ford did face the media onslaught for quite some time, and he likely prolonged the crisis with his initial response strategies—one journalist even followed Ford into a Tim Hortons restaurant to ask him for a response (Mann, 2013). An opinion poll taken a month after the crisis showed that his initial crisis response strategy was indeed unsatisfactory to many Torontonians—60% surveyed felt the mayor did not address the allegations sufficiently (Kitching, 2013). But the crisis died down, journalists moved on to other stories, and Ford continued as mayor.

Despite PR professionals’ concerns about the Fords’ seemingly ineffective and incoherent response strategies, an opinion poll not long after the allegation surfaced showed that 49% of Torontonians believed Ford in this case (Leung, 2013). This is significant support considering Ford has been involved in a long list of well-documented controversies (Amira, 2013; Johnston, McGrath, Previle, Pullen & Shea, 2013). For example, shortly before the crack video story surfaced, Ford’s crisis history was the cover story of the May 2013 issue of Toronto Life magazine, with the long headline “Rob Ford’s Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Year; Lawsuits, scandals and breathtaking blunders—an uncensored look at one crazy mayoralty.” Ford dealt with a number of other crises after the November bombshell as well (The Canadian Press, 2013). This background is important to recognize as having a history of crises has been shown to amplify blame by audiences and increase damage when the next crisis arises (Coombs, 2004a, 2004b, 2006).

Despite this history, Ford’s political base remained intact, according to polls. A Forum Research poll released on June 27 showed that Ford’s approval rating was 47% (Kitching, 2013), mirroring the 2010 mayoral election result. In Ford’s area of staunch support, 45% of Etobicoke voters still planned to vote for him in the 2014 election even after the crack allegations (Leung, 2013). As well, 45% of Torontonians thought the crack video was “a hoax and part of a conspiracy to discredit the mayor” (Leung, 2013). Ipsos Reid pollster John Wright summed up the situation, saying that “What we have is half the public of Toronto believing that this is a media conspiracy … and the other half believing that where there’s smoke there’s fire” (Leung, 2013). In a similar way, Sarah Fulford (2013) noted that Ford is described as “either a modern-day folk hero or an international embarrassment. It all depends on where you stand” (p. 22). Finally, even after Bill Blair’s news that the police had recovered the video, Ford’s support stood
at 44% (Alamenciak, 2013b). Two conclusions follow from these results: first, segments of the Toronto population clearly supported Ford strongly in the face of any negative news; and second, Torontonians had very different views on Ford’s situation, despite the universally critical commentary on his crisis response.

The uncertainty surrounding the existence of the video may explain why Ford’s response—judged poor by PR practitioners—did not hurt his popularity among his core supporters. As of the writing of this article, the video has not yet publically surfaced, despite Blair’s confirmation of its existence. Indeed, after Blair’s news, Ford’s lawyer challenged the police chief to reveal it to the public, which Blair did not (CBC, 2013). The challenge continued to raise the issue of its existence.

More importantly, Ford’s response also draws attention to the applicability of strategies to different audiences. Crisis communication researchers and professionals may inadvertently suggest strategies for crises that are not even crises in the eyes of certain communities. As a result, they may be suggesting strategies that are, indeed, unnecessary to maintaining legitimacy. Michael Kent (2012) questions the implied universality in crisis strategy theory, arguing that “[a]lthough knowing that there are dozens of potential crisis response strategies is helpful, understanding that none of them work in every situation is more helpful” (p. 709). Following from Kent’s point, I argue that even the universally criticized strategies, such as avoidance, may be appropriate in some situations to some audiences. This idea is particularly important to political crisis communication, as I explain below.

The key problem with the PR practitioners’ advice in the Ford case is that their terms of reference were too broad. The phrase “court of public opinion” sounds singular and unified, as if there is one public opinion that should drive assessment of the crisis itself and its possible damage. The phrase “angers voters” implies all voters were angry, as if there is one sentiment that should drive the choice of strategy, but many voters were not. What is “ridiculously unsatisfactory” to one segment of the electorate is perfectly satisfactory to another. A delay may “fuel speculation” but only some part of the electorate speculates—the rest remains satisfied with this crisis response.

**Legitimacy, discourse, and crisis communication response**

The poll results show that Ford’s crisis response strategies of avoidance, denial, and finally, apology, worked—at least to maintain the support that got him elected—even though it went against the advice of the crisis communication literature and PR practitioners. The polls show Ford remained legitimate to a large segment of the Toronto population both in the short- and long-term after news of the video surfaced.

The notion of legitimacy in this case is one that is central to the idea of public relations (Boyd, 2000). A crisis threatens to make an individual or organization illegitimate in the public sphere, meaning that people come to distrust an individual or organization. Trust is an important example of political capital conferred on a person or organization (Bourdieu, 1991). Distrust, in contrast, makes crisis communication difficult or impossible. Distrust “acts to heighten risk perceptions, to intensify public reactions to risk signals, to contribute to the perceived unacceptability of risk, and to stimulate political activism to reduce risk” (Kasperson, Kasperson, Pidgeon & Slovic,
2003, p. 32). All crises are thus crises of legitimacy. Crisis response strategies attempt to repair and maintain that legitimacy in the eyes of a public.

Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). In organizational studies, Meyer and Scott (1983) define legitimacy as “the degree of cultural support for an organization” (p. 201). How does one become legitimate? Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) suggest that legitimacy occurs when the organization’s values match the values of the organization’s environment.

In a study of organizations, Massey (2001) suggests they can gain, maintain, and repair legitimacy. One gains legitimacy before a crisis by working in ways that an audience expects, dealing with stakeholders who believe in the organization, and redefining or modifying just what legitimate behaviour means. Maintaining legitimacy is difficult, Massey argues, if the audience is not uniform (as in politics), or if the organization becomes inflexible and cannot change with the times. Repairing legitimacy is inherently reactive—legitimacy has been lost. Similarly, stakeholder theory posits that having good relations with stakeholders promotes legitimacy, which can help the entity survive a crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000). Oppositely, what does it mean to be illegitimate? Patterson and Allen (1997) see illegitimate actions as “undesirable or as violating societal norms” (p. 293). The key here is to determine in which community—society or smaller—that legitimacy is produced.

The source of legitimacy is vital in considering the Ford crack video case specifically, as well as crisis response strategy more generally. Ford gained political legitimacy within a subset of the Toronto population during his time as Toronto city councillor for the ward of Etobicoke North. Over time, Ford developed a local community of followers as councillor, winning three ward elections from 2000 to 2006. The Ford political brand (Ford’s father was a provincial politician with the Progressive Conservative Party) showed its strength when Rob Ford did not run for the ward seat and instead ran for mayor in 2010. His brother Doug, with no previous political experience, ran in Rob’s place and won his council seat handily.

Rob Ford’s legitimacy in a specific community of residents is a result of a political image that has been extremely consistent throughout his political career, an image that many voters knew well before he was elected mayor. As a self-avowed conservative, Ford regularly emphasizes tax cuts and finding efficiencies in government. He criticizes government program funding to cultural organizations. He gives out his home phone number and encourages people to call him when they have political needs. A letter to the editor from a supporter describes Ford’s cultivated image:

We'd had enough of career politicians who think they're smarter than everyone else and know what's best for us. Yes, we knew Rob Ford was a buffoon when we elected him. We held our noses en masse when we voted for him. We were aware that, sooner or later, he would embarrass us and our wonderful city. (“Letters to the Editor,” 2013, p. 12)

Another letter writer summarizes Ford’s style: “Rob Ford may not be the most articulate, graceful, polished or politically correct mayor we’ve ever had. We didn’t elect
him to be Mr. Toronto, we elected him because he promised to cut spending” (“Letters to the Editor,” 2013, p. 12). Fulford (2013) describes Ford as “unpolished and sincere—rare qualities in a politician. We live in an image-conscious age when even low-level public figures have press advisors. And yet Ford never seems fake” (p. 22). Researchers in the area of relationship marketing have emphasized the importance of brand commitment and loyalty to individuals and organizations (Fournier, 1998; Gundlach, Achrol & Mentzer, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). Ford’s brand, however controversial, has always been strong within a certain segment of the population.

In terms of image and message, Ford does regularly what the public relations literature encourages: consistency and coherence (Benoit & McHale, 1999; Hay, 1995; Massey, 2001). His history of good stakeholder relations with his core supporters creates goodwill, a reserve in marketing called the “halo effect” that mitigates crisis damage (Balzer & Suls, 1992; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

In his political work, Ford acts consistently (even if those actions offend many) and stays on one simple, coherent message in day-to-day dealings with voters: he says he will lower their taxes and carefully watch the spending of their tax dollars. This approach holds a great deal of weight in political discourse today. A consistent politician is typically favoured over one that “flip-flops” or seems to seek power for the spoils of office.

The sources of legitimacy and illegitimacy are communities—legitimacy and illegitimacy are cultural constructs. Every society, every nation, every group defines its own sense of legitimacy. The meanings of legitimacy circulate in the discourses of communities. I define discourse as the acceptable ways of speaking and acting in a social domain (Fairclough, 1989, 1995a, 1995b; Gee, 2005; Mills, 2004; van Dijk, 1988, 1997). The social domain could be an interest group, a fan club, a political party, a classroom, an aggregate section of the population, a province, a nation, and so on. Within each community, certain values and norms reign, which may or may not reign in other communities (and these values may change over time). People and organizations may exist in many communities at the same time, particularly in politics.

If legitimacy is determined only within a community, then crisis communicators must understand the discourse of that community to know what is legitimate and what is not. This leads to an understanding of what is illegitimate and thus what constitutes a crisis in the first place. This also leads to an understanding of how to respond effectively.

The notion of discourse in community and its connection with crisis communication, however, has rarely been examined. One researcher’s studies do stand out, however. Livesey (2001, 2002a, 2002b) has looked at the discourse of organizations that produce dangerous products, such as oil. These organizations inevitably run into controversy, whether from oil spills or from changes in perceptions about oil and the natural environment. Livesey conceives of such companies as living within discourses that they can attempt to modify but cannot ignore or completely change. Crisis communication for these organizations involves understanding, meeting, and modifying the values and norms of seemingly opposing discourses, like development and environmentalism.

Thinking about individuals and organizations in crisis as working within discourses of communities helps us to see legitimacy not as a thing to be produced by
the individual or organization. Rather, in discourse, an individual or organization stands positioned as legitimate or not based on actions; the individual or organization does not create legitimacy all by itself. This notion has implications for crisis response strategy. Before choosing and applying a strategy, crisis responders need to understand their communities and those communities’ ideas of legitimacy. Crisis responders should answer these questions: 1) to which community am I primarily speaking? 2) what are the norms and values of that community? 3) how does the community feel about the action in question? Choosing a response before knowing the answers to these questions jumps the gun.

Even in his role as the mayor of all Torontonians, Rob Ford has regularly addressed a segment of Toronto he knows very well as “Ford Nation” (Church, 2011; Dale, 2011; Jenkins & Peat, 2011). Ford has characterized his base as hardworking taxpayers: “Ford Nation is too busy working, paying taxes, creating jobs. That’s what they are doing” (Church, 2011, p. A13). Forum Research president Lorne Bozinoff notes, “Ford Nation is a very loyal group of individuals and they’ve stuck with him through thick and thin” (Kitching, 2013). This is the 47% that elected Ford, the 47% that approved of him after the crisis, and the 47% that Ford understands and addresses in his communication.

**Defining crisis as discursive break**

Despite the concern for legitimacy in public relations and crisis communication literature, the definitions of crisis—which PR professionals need to know first to identify crises and respond effectively—do not take into account the communities in which notions of legitimacy form. Instead, most definitions describe a crisis as a thing, an enemy, and an outsider, to be prevented, controlled, or stopped.

From the crisis communication literature, definitions of crisis also include some or all of the following elements: surprise, unpredictability, negative consequences, low probability, high consequence, high impact, nonroutine, ambiguity, and disruption (Barton, 1993; Coombs, 1999b; Dean, 2004; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Seeger, 2002; Taylor & Perry, 2005; Weick, 1988). Yet all of these elements draw attention to discourses and legitimacy—they are all outside the normal, the everyday, the expected, the accepted.

Coombs and Holladay (2004) describe a crisis in a slightly different way, as “an event for which people seek causes and make attributions” (p. 97). This goes beyond the question of legitimacy; some action is already illegitimate and the people respond with blame. Coombs (2004a) also has created a typology of crises: natural disaster, rumour, product tampering, workplace violence, challenges, technical error, product recall, technical-error accident, human-error product recall, human error, accident, and organizational misdeed. The implication is that responders should match their crisis to these types and respond with the appropriate strategy, a strategy that varies depending on how responsible one is for the crisis. Rumour seems the most appropriate in the Ford crack video case, although it is not a perfect fit. The other types do not adequately characterize Ford’s situation and do not provide appropriate guidance in this case.

These definitional elements and typologies help in understanding what crisis communication practitioners are looking for, and they certainly map out uncharted territory
in this growing field. They provide direction. But, to use a medical metaphor, these crisis types are only a symptom of some greater problem of legitimacy. An organizational misdeed is a crisis only because it violates a discourse that values propriety in business. A human error is a crisis because it violates a discourse that values technical proficiency and correctness. In both examples, values and norms define what is, and what is not, legitimate and thus what is, and what is not, a crisis. A list of crisis types cannot adequately cover the myriad possible crises; instead, a broader concept is needed.

In the attempt to neatly codify crises into types with associated response strategies, response strategy threatens to become automatic and inflexible (find the type, apply the strategy). This could mean PR practitioners respond ineffectively despite best intentions and having a theoretical defence in mind. Kent (2012) regards this definitional problem as essential to understanding crisis response:

How we define “crisis” needs to be examined. An organization laying off thousands of employees is often described as a “crisis” and yet, from the standpoint of the organization, laying off thousands of employees will allow the organization to “better compete.” Thus, from the organization’s standpoint, how is a layoff a crisis? (p. 709)

While Kent does not use the word discourse, his broader view of crisis implies almost as much. Within the hypothetical organization’s community, the layoffs are legitimate and not a crisis (indeed, they might prevent a crisis of losing money, being uncompetitive, and going bankrupt). Within the workers’ community, however, the layoffs are clearly a crisis. The company’s action stands outside the realm of acceptability, for them. To the workers, the company’s action is surprising, unpredictable, negative, low probability, high consequence, high impact, nonroutine, and disruptive.

Hints of discourse theory and community theory surface occasionally in the crisis communication literature. Benoit (1997b) alludes to discourse and community when he notes that “the key question is not if the act was in fact offensive, but whether the act is believed by the relevant audience(s) to be heinous” (p. 178). Kent (2012) further notes this audience factor when he rightly argues that “an event that is a crisis for one public is not necessarily a crisis for another” (p. 709). This is vital to understanding the efficacy of Rob Ford’s crisis communication—Ford’s supporters did not believe there was a crisis at all. Even if the video surfaces, Ford supporters may choose to forgive personal transgressions and continue their support of his political work.

The Ford crack video case thus helps us better understand crisis in a new way: I argue that crisis is actually a discursive break. A discursive break is any action or speech that goes against the accepted ways of acting or speaking in a social domain. It goes against what a community considers legitimate.

With this concept in mind, PR practitioners should attend not to the quick application of universal principles of response strategy, but to the values and norms of the communities in which they work. These values and norms may change, as discourses change over time (crisis, in this way, becomes historically situated). This concept of discursive break is similar to Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer’s (2003) “crisis of public perception” (p. 54). If a crisis is a discursive break, it is always a crisis of public perception.
While most definitions of crisis do not take community into account, Benoit mentions this factor in passing. He notes that a PR practitioner may choose to prioritize one audience in choosing response strategies:

Finally, corporations often address multiple audiences. For example, a business might face local citizens, governmental regulators, stockholders, employees, pressure groups, and politicians. Each audience potentially has diverse interests, concerns, and goals. The crisis communicator must identify the most important audience (or prioritize important audiences). (Benoit, 1997b, p. 178)

This is a critical point for political crisis communication. Politicians are elected to serve all people in a geographic area, but they must also deal with the pressures of partisanship to ensure their re-election. To maintain support, they must prioritize and speak to their most important audience, usually a segment of the population. That segment of the population may prioritize some norms and values more than other segments do.

Attention to crisis as a discursive break also means one need not spend time classifying static crisis types like “natural disaster.” For example, a natural disaster creates little attribution of responsibility to those in charge—it is often called an act of God. Conversely, looking at crisis as discursive break means focusing on the communication of leaders responding to the crisis. In that way, the crisis is not the natural disaster but the discursive break; the responders have spoken or acted in a way that falls outside legitimacy. Looking at crisis as a discursive break in a community allows consideration of community norms and values that will drive the assessment of the actions (crisis or not) and will drive the choice of response strategy. Take the example of American religious ministry leader Jimmy Swaggart. One study found that his use of apology after a sexual transgression was an effective response—the Christian community respected apology as a confession of sins (Legg, 2009). The response worked because the community expected and valued it.

Politics, community, and crisis response choices

The idea of discursive break is vital to understanding crisis response in politics in particular. In a study of celebrity and political crisis communication, Benoit (1997a) alludes to the uniqueness of crisis response in political communities: “One important difference is that politicians have different constituencies (geographically as well as politically)” (p. 255). In those different constituencies, we find different norms and values that contextualize events and actions in different ways.

Politicians’ communities are not quite like the communities of, for example, a company that sells a product. A company selling a product that ends up injuring children must address one main community in its crisis response: the customers who brought the product (other communities exist too, but this one comes first). This audience demands a quick and helpful response—avoidance and denial will not suffice. However, a politician who wins a mayoralty, like Ford, has two main audiences, at least in democratic theory: the whole of the public that the politician must govern fairly, and the partisans who voted for the politician.
Additionally, politicians deciding on crisis response strategies are troubled by a unique factor: they regularly face institutionalized antagonists, whose job is to publicize and amplify actions, illuminating and elongating crises (Benoit, 1997a). This fact is inherent in all politics. All politics, as Pierre Bourdieu (1991) notes, involves “the interplay of oppositions and distinctions” (p. 185). As Terence Ball (1988) argues,

[d]isagreement, conceptual contestation, the omnipresent threat of communicative breakdown, and the possibility of conceptual change are, as it were, built into the very structure of political discourse. (p. 13)

What is legitimate in politics is not inherently legitimate, but rather it needs to be continually reproduced in “struggles between the different authorities who compete within the field of specialized production” (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 58). Applying Ball’s (1998) and Bourdieu’s ideas, then, crisis may be built into the very structure of political discourse. Crisis is, indeed, normal in politics because politicians and partisan groups are always contesting meaning and positioning actions and speech as discursive breaks in order to wrest away power. Furthermore, politicians also face the media, often in an antagonistic relationship. A media report may lead to a crisis, as it outlines actions some part of the public may deem illegitimate. The Gawker.com and Toronto Star reports worked in this way for Rob Ford.

If one considers the partisan community involved—in this case, Ford’s supporters—the dilemma facing crisis responders in applying the advice of the crisis communication literature becomes clear. The video’s existence was uncertain, and one major partisan community believed it was a hoax, disregarding the reports. In that case, for a good number of people, there was no crisis, no damage, and thus no crisis response required. The video news could not harm Ford’s legitimacy within that group, so the situation failed to meet the definition of a discursive break in that community. Beyond that partisan community, the action in the video, real or hoax as it may be, was illegitimate, and thus constituted a discursive break. To outsiders, this was indeed a crisis. But for a partisan politician, an action deemed a crisis only by a community who voted for other politicians is not a particularly important concern for maintaining legitimacy. Nonetheless, the typical advice in the crisis response literature, and offered by PR professionals, is to apologize. Apology, however, does not make sense if the relevant community does not see the existence of a crisis at all, and only partisan opponents do.

To those who believed the reports of the crack video, proof of the existence of the video was unimportant. The reports themselves were already sufficient to constitute a crisis. The action in the alleged video—and the lack of clear, direct response to the reports—constituted a violation of a discourse to those people (that is, that politicians should not do illegal drugs, or politicians should not avoid or hide). But this segment of the population already had no favour for the mayor—they likely did not vote for him in 2010 or before. For Ford, the situation did not disrupt his relationship with them or hurt their support, since Ford had never earned their support and may never earn it. This partisanship factor is important, as it has been found to affect the audience reception of a politician’s public communication (Benoit, 2006a). Apology as a strategy directed to a community of non-support may only serve to fuel the partisan fire.
This concept of audience reception has not been applied to political crisis communication even though it is a central theory in fields such as communication studies, cultural studies, and literary studies. Indeed, partisan communities resemble what Stanley Fish (1976, 1980) calls “interpretative communities.” Interpretative communities, Fish writes (1980), “are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. … these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around” (p. 14). In the Ford case, some partisans have been creating meaning from the various news reports in a way that reflects their common, and often long, association with Ford. As the Ford case exists within a battle between interpretive communities—followers and oppositionists—one side also assumes its perception is true and the other’s is not (Fish, 1976). Stuart Hall (1990) reminds us of this process of the production of difference and “the other”: “there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position, which has no absolute guarantee in an unproblematic, transcendental ‘law of origin’” (p. 226). Identity of any sort inherently implies difference; otherwise, representation could not occur (Hall, 1990). Ford’s positioning of himself as an average person, like his followers, he says, opposes an identity of politicians as the “elite.” Similarly, his followers see their own identities in Ford—they too make mistakes and they see their difference. Their support of his crisis response becomes one of forgiveness—for him and for themselves.

Surprisingly, very little has been written on these unique concerns of partisanship and community in crisis communication. One case, however, provides a useful example in this vein. Sheldon and Sallot (2008) empirically tested Benoit’s general recommendation of apology in political crisis communication cases. They examined the case of U.S. Senator Trent Lott and racial comments (called faux pas) that he made at a party celebrating long-time Senator Strom Thurmond. Thurmond had, in the past, promoted racial segregation. At the party, Lott praised Thurmond, implying that a continuation of racial segregation would have helped America in the long run. The racial comments received widespread coverage in the media, constituting a crisis among segments of the population. Lott’s comments, however, did not seem illegitimate to his own Republican community—Lott spoke to the converted. The comments constituted a crisis in the greater American public, spurred on by Democratic criticism.

Sheldon and Sallot took the Lott case and constructed a careful experiment of varying mock crisis responses, including apology, for the racial comments. Three hundred-forty-eight students read the mock articles and responded to a survey. The main finding was that this specific, constructed audience thought favourably of the strategy of apology. Sheldon and Sallot conclude their analysis with a comment that hints at the idea of community recognition, but it misses the mark. They write:

Identifying types of crises and knowing which response strategies are effective can mean the difference for a politician between majority leader and early retirement. Some politicians may never recover from crises; others may emerge changed and wiser, but not destroyed. By knowing what the public wants, expects, and needs to hear, crisis managers can cultivate
and maintain better relationships between the public and the elected officials they counsel. (p. 48)

The key point here is “what the public wants, expects, and needs to hear.” Certainly this makes sense, but their study and test suffer from the same conceptual issue that prevents practical application to cases like the Ford crack video case, namely, that the students who read the mock articles are regarded as a single public. In other words, the group assessing the response does not resemble a partisan community in real-world politics. The advice of apology is obvious, since this unified public of university students would likely not regard Lott’s comments as acceptable.

In the Ford case, a test of communication-strategy efficacy would require constructed statements presented for review to audience members who have a clear preference for or against Ford—that would assess the partisan factor in crisis response strategy. In a way, this has already been done: public opinion polls in the Ford case both showed those preferences and showed that the response actually maintained, and certainly did not reduce, his support.

**Conclusion**

The crisis communication literature provides helpful, and increasingly, empirically tested advice to PR practitioners for responding effectively to a crisis. For political crisis communication, however, these response strategies miss an important step: the consideration of partisan community. The discussion in this article has emphasized that political strategy needs to inform and direct crisis response strategy. Crisis response strategy, in turn, must become *critical* crisis response strategy. That is, it must consider the power inherent in political discourse, the vagaries of partisan politics, and reflect such considerations in recommendations for response strategies.

In the crack video case, Rob Ford straddles two political communities. He is both the mayor of the whole city and the self-styled leader of Ford Nation. Much of his support comes from the suburbs, not downtown wards—only 24% of those polled downtown said they would vote for him in the next election (Leung, 2013). While Ford must serve as the mayor of all, his support comes from less than a majority of voters, both in the last municipal election and in the polls after the recent events.

Rob Ford’s response—a quick denial of “ridiculous” reports, avoidance, and then apology—kept him in his job and maintained a solid political base. For most politicians in the cutthroat political world, this would be considered a success. Indeed, the response resonated with Ford’s partisan community, a community that did not believe the video even existed. His is a perfectly reasonable, if counterintuitive and cynical, response to a specific community. The Ford case provides preliminary evidence for a subtle but important contextualization of crisis response in a new way. With the Ford case in mind, a political PR crisis responder should hesitate to work in absolutes in this nascent stage of crisis response theory. Political crisis responders cannot simply apply tested strategies to all cases—there is no “one size fits all” response strategy.

Critics of Ford’s response strategy make the mistake of applying the norms of a single community, or suggesting generalized advice when they assess his response. As a result, the polls suggest such advice would be inappropriate. The strategy of apology
only makes sense if the targeted community recognizes the situation as a crisis and in turn demands an apology.

Important questions for future research develop out of this concern for partisan community in crisis response: Does identifying or creating a community of supporters ensure a strong and continued awareness of its values and needs? Does identifying or creating a community of supporters always mitigate any potential damage? Should community-building be a vital part of crisis planning? Similarly, Kent (2012) wonders “how important the relationship between an organization and its publics is to weather crises” (p. 709).

Crisis responders who attend to a partisan community may have a better sense of that community's values and norms—that is, what is and what is not legitimate. This will inform response. Members of that community may confer legitimacy upon the individual or organization. This way of thinking mirrors a greater shift toward seeing public relations not as a transmission model of communication (to use James Carey's [1989] term), but as a ritual model of communication (Massey, 2001). In the ritual model, people do not consume media for information so as much as to feel a part of a community (Carey), whether it is to participate in or identify with the Canadian nation or Ford Nation. Looking at PR this way, PR professionals become not simply transmitters of messages to the public, but individuals immersed in dialogic publics (Botan, 1993, 1997; Botan & Soto, 1998; Hale, Dulek & Hale, 2005).

Finally, this article has not considered the ethics of Ford's crisis response. The delay and avoidance clearly antagonized a segment of the population that Ford must still serve, even as the partisan battles escalate in the lead-up to the next Toronto mayoral election. Furthermore, Rob Ford clearly lied to journalists and thus the public about using drugs—his November apology contradicts his May denial. More importantly, ethical concerns pervade this idea of political crisis response strategies by leaders who target only certain people; if response strategies are directed at only one group, like Ford Nation, then the mayor of all Torontonians has deliberately, and cynically, communicated to a mere segment of the whole population he is supposed to lead.

The Ford case is important not because of the consequences for Ford—whether he wins the 2014 election is inconsequential for this analysis. What is more important is that his stakeholders conferred upon him the mayoralty, and they stuck with him throughout the inconsistencies in crisis response, even though his was an approach universally decried by PR practitioners. For all his mistakes and lies, Ford provides a useful lesson in beginning to understand the unique characteristics of the political field in crisis communication.

Note
1. Poll numbers do have margins for error, and non-response and response biases, so they are not a perfect reflection of public opinion. Nonetheless, poll numbers have been used successfully in crisis communication research to show the effectiveness of response strategies, providing before/after crisis efficacy comparisons (Benoit, 1982, 2006a; Benoit, Gullifor & Panici, 1991; Benoit & Henson, 2009; Benoit & McHale, 1999; Kennedy & Benoit, 1997).
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