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THE UNIVERSITY AS THE VICTIM: HOW TO RESPOND TO THE MEDIA'S
ALLEGATIONS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT ON CAMPUS

A Creative Project Submitted to the
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By
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The creative project of Elizabeth M. Juran is hereby accepted:

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Introduction

Sexual assault, “any type of sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient,” among college students is prevalent in today’s world (The United States Department of Justice, 2016). In fact, a 2014 study by the White House Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault found that one in five college students is sexually assaulted during their college career (“Realities of Sexual Assault,” n.d.).

The university responding swiftly and effectively in the face of sex crimes is important. It is both common communications knowledge and federal law. That response includes not only obligatory medical care for the victim and police response to the assailant, but also thorough communication of an incident to the campus community and public. The concern first and foremost is with the students, but informing the media is a part of the crisis communication plan.

The media today reports on sex crimes with great frequency. There is an open dialogue on rape, assault, and other similar crimes. In other words, such stories are in demand. A salacious sex crime story is likely to garner great response from viewers, who may continue the conversation on social media. The prevalence of sex crimes and a willingness of the media to report on them could spell disaster for a university who finds itself with a sex crime allegation. The media may already have names, specifics, and witness statements. In that case, a whirlwind of coverage is to be expected. With an institution’s reputation on the line, swift communication with the media and public is necessary, and the first response is crucial.

What are the consequences of poor public relations in a situation like this?

Backlash from the media and the public. Poor retention. Low enrollment. Loss of alumni backing. A lasting negative reputation. The school's response to the media's allegations should not be handled lightly; in fact, it should be treated as a crisis communication scenario in and of itself.

A whole new crisis arises if the media is able to spin a story into a headline-grabbing horror story with the university at the heart of the action. All eyes are on the university, and how the school responds initially can have lasting impact on its reputation. In this case, the victim is the university and the assailant is the media.

The goal of this project is to first review the literature relevant to crisis theory, stakeholders, crisis response, and reputation management. Next, a case study of the first response by an American university involved in a sexual assault-related media torrent will be investigated and evaluated. Finally, a revised first response of the case study is presented, illustrating guidelines for an appropriate and effective first response.

Literature Review

In the university setting, the potential for a crisis is ever-present. With students, employees, alumni, financial backers, and community members all hung in a delicate balance, one small piece falling out of place has the potential to wreak havoc on the university's reputation, if not handled correctly. The focus of this study is on the initial response from the university in a crisis involving the media and sex crime allegations.

Crisis Communication Theory

To understand how best to approach such a crisis, it must be understood that a crisis, according to Vettenranta (2015), "can be defined as a collective stress situation in

which conflicts emerge between parties” (p. 54). In other words, “a major unpredictable event that has potentially negative results. The event and its aftermath may significantly damage an organization and its employees, products, services, financial condition, and reputation” (Barton, 1993, p. 2). Coombs extends this discussion to threatening stakeholders’ expectations, which “can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes” (2011, p. 19). There is a public relations impact as well, which Gower (2006) hinted at: “a significant business disruption that stimulates extensive news media coverage. The resulting public scrutiny will affect the organization’s normal operations and also could have a political, legal, financial, and governmental impact on its business” (p. 98).

In looking at crisis communication through the theoretical lens, perhaps the most telling indication of how an organization’s reputation will be affected is how the media frames the crisis. According to Coombs (2007), “frames in communication help to shape frames in thought” (p. 167). The framing effect occurs when the media chooses certain aspects of a situation to focus on, thus causing the receivers of the media’s message to, in turn, focus their attention on those aspects when they make decisions (Druckman, 2001). In other words, people’s opinions about an issue are directly affected by the media’s frame of that issue, because frames put emphasis on certain facts which are used when people make decisions about their feelings on a certain issue (Joslyn, 2003).

Furthermore, people’s decisions on how they feel about an organization can be determined according to Attribution Theory. When Attribution Theory is applied to crisis communication, it suggests that an organization with a history of crises has an ongoing problem which should be addressed (Kelley & Michela, 1980). By this logic, prior crises

and how they were handled by an organization have an effect on the threat to an organization's reputation from a present crisis: "either a history of crises or an unfavorable prior relational reputation intensifies attributions of crisis responsibility thereby indirectly affecting the reputational threat" (Coombs, 2007, p. 167). Both of these factors play heavily in analyzing the first response of the university, as they impact how the response will be framed.

Stakeholders

Communicating a crisis results in a situation where a number of stakeholders and interested parties, including the media, vie for a grasp of the true social reality (Gurevitch & Levy, 1985.) According to Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2013), poor crisis communication can result in "organizations and the many people associated with them... to be stunned, frightened, and depressed when enveloped by a crisis" (p. 4). Due to the nature of crises involving many different institutions, universities must be especially aware of their audiences when communicating a crisis. A misstep could lead to distrust between the university and key stakeholders.

Stakeholders, according to Fombrun and van Riel (2004), are key because the information they receive about an organization determines its reputation. The stakeholders of any organization receive their information "through interactions with an organization, mediated reports about an organization (including the news media and advertising) and second-hand information from other people (e.g., word of mouth and weblogs)" (Coombs, 2007, p. 164). The stakeholders then use that information to compare to other similar organizations as a baseline, attempting to decide whether the organization behaved in the way they expected. The reputation, then, is based on the

stakeholders' evaluation of the organization's behavior meeting their expectations (Coombs, 2007).

A reputation can be gravely threatened by a crisis because it creates an opportunity for the stakeholder to think negatively of an organization (Coombs, 2007). Former Kent State University Head of Communications Tom Neumann advised that an organization's reputation will likely be assessed after the crisis situation is over. It could be adversely affected based on how the organization addresses the crisis (T. Neumann, personal communication, February 18, 2016).

To know a university's stakeholders is to know who defines the university's reputation. The university's immediate stakeholders are the current students and faculty. Prospective new students and their parents are another important stakeholder in the face of a crisis. According to Kelsay (2007), one of the four most common factors considered by prospective students and their parents is safety, based on a study which indicated that the media's coverage of a crisis event "was identified as a major factor that could affect enrollment," (p. 9). Kelsay's recommendation for maintaining strong relationships with this particular stakeholder in a time of crisis was increased communication between the crisis management team and the university representatives who work with students. Openness and straightforwardness were cited as key actions to avoid a negative response from prospective students and their parents (2007). Jarret (2015) specifically addressed prospective college students and their parents about a university's reputation and record with handling sexual assault, and recommended that parents and students ask their college representative about education and prevention programs, Title IX coordinators, sexual assault reporting processes, and victim support. With regards to a crisis as serious

as media involvement in a university's sexual assault scandal, ignoring this stakeholder would be detrimental to future enrollment.

Another set of stakeholders are donors and government agencies, and a side effect of ignoring these stakeholders is losing monetary backing as well as a failed reputation (Goldhaber, 1993). Thus, effective communication in times of crisis and otherwise is essential to maintaining financial success.

A final stakeholder in the university crisis communication is the university's surrounding community. In Leeper & Leeper's (2006) case study of the University of Missouri- Kansas City, an in-depth look at the communication between the university and its surrounding neighborhoods revealed a failure to effectively and efficiently get necessary information to the community. In the end, "the continuing issue between the local neighborhood and the university was a perceived lack of communication between the local neighborhood and university as the foundation for a relationship" (Leeper & Leeper, 2006, p. 140). The surrounding community had no support for the university in the university's time of crisis, which only heightened the dilemma.

Crisis Response

Hale, Dulek, and Hale (2005) outlined the linear crisis response communication model, which is executed among a crisis communication team after a triggering event with the sequential steps of observation, interpretation, choice, and dissemination.

Observation involves gathering and organizing data about the unfolding crisis, then making it accessible. Accuracy and speed are integral in this step. The interpretation step is where communicators assign meaning to all information gathered in the observation step, separating the relevant and legitimate information from the irrelevant and

illegitimate. The next step, choice, is where the communication team must understand the current crisis situation, evaluate the impact that certain actions will have on the crisis damage, and finally come to a decision. Lastly, dissemination is the step where those implementing the decisions made in the choice step are informed about their responsibilities, and where more information is given to the public (Hale et al., 2005).

Kim's (2015) TTR model of crisis communication adds three principles: transparency (what), two-way symmetrical communication (how), and right time (when). Transparency shows respect for the needs of the stakeholders as they pertain to what information is necessary, by sharing that information with truthfulness, candor, openness, and honesty. Two-way symmetrical communication is used in this model with the understanding that an organization should engage in a dialogue with its stakeholders and understand all viewpoints involved when crafting the crisis response. Finally, right time points to immediate response in all stages of a crisis. This includes a timely response to the crisis as well as prompt communication through the entire life cycle of the crisis (before, during, and after) (Kim, 2015).

Coombs's Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) is similar with respect to the recommended timing of a response in a crisis. SCCT starts by determining the type of crisis at hand: victim (where the organization is also a victim of the crisis), accidental (where the organization unintentionally caused the crisis), or preventable (where the organization knowingly put individuals at risk of the crisis with inappropriate actions) (Coombs, 2007).

In an instance where the media popularizes a story of sexual assault at a university, the university would be involved in a victim crisis. Depending on the type of

crisis, a predictable level of responsibility will be attributed to the organization (Coombs, 2007). A higher level of crisis responsibility attributed to the organization involved reflects negatively on the organization's reputation (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). However, if there is a history of crises and/or an existing poor reputation, the type of crisis matters far less; even a victim crisis can garner a high reputational threat (Coombs & Holladay, 2001).

The primary crisis responses, according to SCCT, are denial, diminish, and rebuild, with each progressing response strategy showing greater concern for victims, thus demonstrating responsibility for the crisis (Coombs, 2006). Thus, "as the reputational threat and negative affect increases... crisis managers should utilize crisis response strategies with the requisite level of accepting crisis responsibility" (Coombs, 2007, p. 172).

When it comes to actively persuading people to feel a certain way about an organization, the organization may look to the ancient art of rhetoric. Ancient philosopher Aristotle introduced the modes of persuasion to the art of rhetoric: ethos, pathos, and logos. Ethos relates to the credibility of the speaker in the eyes of the audience. Pathos plays to the emotions of the audience, while logos relates to the logic behind the argument and how well it can be supported with facts. According to MacLeod (2014), "any successful communication utilises all three modes of persuasion to be successful" (p. 137). He also suggested that the three must be used together to make best use of each facet. If logos were used singularly, an organization would respond to a crisis simply by listing facts and letting the audience make its own inferences from there. That, however, would not be effective in persuading a certain response. Without a credible speaker who

demonstrates ethos, the facts wouldn't have much bearing and "any crisis communication may fail to have an impact on the audience's behaviour" (p. 138). Furthermore, using empathy in the message as an appeal to pathos "is the key to influencing human behavior in a crisis" (p. 138). In sum, communication using logos, pathos, and ethos in harmony results in effective messages "that are empathetic, appear honest and open, and come from a trusted source" and are "most effective in a crisis" (p. 264).

In regard to reputation, Benoit's image restoration theory (1997) offers a theory of five possible categories of response to a crisis, all which pertain to reputation repair: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of event offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Denial involves denying that the crisis occurred at all, evasion of responsibility involves justifying or excusing the crisis, reduction of offensiveness involves attempting to mitigate the crisis, corrective action is making a change to fix the issue, and mortification is claiming responsibility and apologizing for the crisis (Benoit, 2007). The best action for reputation repair depends on the specific circumstance, but ethics should always be kept top of mind.

Ethics and Transparency in Crisis Communication

When responding to a crisis with stakeholders in mind, ethics should take top priority. This means, according to Coombs (2007), that "the first priority in any crisis is to protect stakeholders from harm, not to protect the reputation" (p. 165). Nuemann also advises that "the organization's first concern is to alleviate the threat" (T. Nuemann, personal communication, February 18, 2016). In the case of sexual assault, this involves instructing the stakeholders how to avoid any physical threat, which in turn allows them to cope with the psychological threat. Because crises create stress and uncertainty, the

best way to alleviate those feelings within the stakeholders is to keep them informed about what's happened. Additionally, stakeholders should be informed about what is being done to correct the situation. Finally, the organization involved in a crisis should make an expression of concern for the victims of the crisis. Stakeholders expect an expression of concern, which should not be confused with an admission of guilt (Coombs, 2007). As Coombs stated, "it would be irresponsible to begin crisis communication by focusing on the organization's reputation. To be ethical, crisis managers must begin their efforts by using communication to address the physical and psychological concerns of the victims" (Coombs, 2007, p. 165).

Kim (2015) reinforced the importance of ethics in crisis communication, focusing on several crucial principles such as truthfulness and transparency. McHale, Zompetti, and Moffitt (2007) echoed this view in their analysis of Nike's crisis response following media allegations of sweatshop employee abuse in its factories. Nike responded to the media firestorm with truthfulness and transparency by sharing its social responsibility statements and initiating external investigations for the factories, which allowed them a favorable reputation following the scandal (McHale et al., 2007). However, not all organizations use ethics to their advantage when dealing with a crisis. As Wright (2006) showed, Enron's failure to use transparency in their communications with the public during a major financial crisis led to their reputation's demise, ultimately. In an example more comparable to this paper, Varma (2011) found that when Louisiana State University attempted to mitigate a coach's scandalous resignation amid claims of inappropriate relations with a student, transparency was compromised in the initial messaging and, as a result, the school's reputation was endangered.

The two-way symmetrical model of communication, first introduced by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and expanded upon by Kim (2015), focuses on balanced communication between the organization and the public when exchanging information. They maintained that this model of communication is ethical because the steps involve truth-telling and the organization understanding the viewpoints of the stakeholders as well as the stakeholders understanding the viewpoints of management; in other words, mutual respect and mutual understanding (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

There are myriad channels to communicate a crisis response, but a university's messaging should always be delivered with the main stakeholder in mind: the student body (Mainardes, Alves, & Raposo, 2010). For universities, a student body that is stable and maintains loyalty to the college is central; a crisis involving the students puts the university's reputation in particular danger (Snoeiijers, Poels, & Nicolay, 2014). With the popularity of social media as a form of communication, especially among college-aged people, it is only natural that a university take to social media to respond to a crisis situation. According to Utz, Schultz, and Glocka (2013) "an organization that uses social media to inform its stakeholders about an organizational crisis signals that it is eager to inform its stakeholders quickly and directly and that it is willing to engage in a dialogue with them" (p. 42). Snoeiijers et al. (2014) conducted a study on social media as a university crisis communication vehicle, and found that adapting information, which is usually more emotional, is shared more on both Facebook and Twitter than instructional information. Furthermore, the study indicated that a message coming from the Dean's social media account as opposed to the official university account garnered more discussion online and in face-to-face interactions as well as more reactions on Facebook

(Snoeijs et al., 2014). While social media offers an efficient route to engage stakeholders, traditional media is not to be ignored by universities in a crisis situation. It is important to utilize traditional media to establish credibility, especially considering that traditional media still affects how people respond to and form opinions about a crisis (Liu, Austin, & Jin, 2011).

Case Study

On November 19, 2014, Rolling Stone magazine published an online feature story titled, "A Rape on Campus." In this piece, writer Sabrina Rubin Erdely uncovered a purposefully hushed "rape culture" among universities in America, citing multiple university mishandlings of student sexual assault and rape incidents. Through the whole 9,000 word story, a running narrative of "Jackie," a student at University of Virginia (UVA), provided a poignant and graphic illustration of what today's student rape victim looks like and the tribulations she faces. The story details Jackie's horrifying account of a gang rape she suffered at UVA fraternity Phi Kappa Psi during the fall of her freshman year in 2012:

"Shut up," she heard a man's voice say as a body barreled into her, tripping her backward and sending them both crashing through a low glass table. There was a heavy person on top of her, spreading open her thighs, and another person kneeling on her hair, hands pinning down her arms, sharp shards digging into her back, and excited male voices rising all around her. When yet another hand clamped over her mouth, Jackie bit it, and the hand became a fist that punched her in the face. The men surrounding her began to laugh. For a hopeful moment Jackie wondered if

this wasn't some collegiate prank. Perhaps at any second someone would flick on the lights and they'd return to the party.

"Grab its motherfucking leg," she heard a voice say. And that's when Jackie knew she was going to be raped.

She remembers every moment of the next three hours of agony, during which, she says, seven men took turns raping her, while two more – her date, Drew, and another man – gave instruction and encouragement. She remembers how the spectators swigged beers, and how they called each other nicknames like Armpit and Blanket. She remembers the men's heft and their sour reek of alcohol mixed with the pungency of marijuana. Most of all, Jackie remembers the pain and the pounding that went on and on (Erdely, 2014).

The article wove statistics and other accounts of on-campus rape with Jackie's story of her rapist, who she knew from her campus lifeguarding job; her interactions with friends, who discouraged her from reporting her rape; her pleas for help to UVA officials, which were mishandled; and her subsequent depression and suicidal thoughts. All told, Rolling Stone's exposé caused a major stir when released online, even before the print version rolled out on December 4th, 2014.

On the day the article was published online, UVA president Teresa Sullivan issued a statement on the university's website, which outlined the university's policies and procedures for sexual violence as well as the numerous initiatives UVA was engaged in to prevent sexual assault. She stated that the Rolling Stone article "negatively depicts the University of Virginia and its handling of sexual misconduct cases":

To the University community:

I am writing in response to a Rolling Stone magazine article that negatively depicts the University of Virginia and its handling of sexual misconduct cases. Because of federal and state privacy laws, and out of respect for sexual assault survivors, we are very limited in what we can say about any of the cases mentioned in this article.

The article describes an alleged sexual assault of a female student at a fraternity house in September 2012, including many details that were previously not disclosed to University officials. I have asked the Charlottesville Police Department to formally investigate this incident, and the University will cooperate fully with the investigation.

The University takes seriously the issue of sexual misconduct, a significant problem that colleges and universities are grappling with across the nation. Our goal is to provide an environment that is as safe as possible for our students and the entire University community.

We have recently adopted several new initiatives and policies aimed at fostering a culture of reporting and raising awareness of the issues.

We want our students to feel comfortable coming forward with information when there are problems in the community and cooperating with local law enforcement and the student disciplinary process. We also want them to feel empowered to take action and to lead efforts to make our Grounds and our community a better place to live and learn.

We have been taking a leadership role on issues regarding sexual misconduct and violence. UVA hosted a national conference on this topic in February 2014. “Dialogue at UVA: Sexual Misconduct Among College Students” brought together national experts and professionals from approximately 60 colleges and universities to discuss best practices and strategies for prevention and response.

The HoosGotYourBack initiative, part of the Not On Our Grounds awareness campaign, was developed and launched in collaboration with students and with local Corner merchants to increase active bystander behavior.

A number of other initiatives are also planned for the spring. Among them are the implementation of a new student sexual misconduct policy and a related training program, a campus climate survey and an in-depth bystander intervention program that will include students, faculty and staff.

More information about sexual violence education and resources is available on the University’s website at <http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/>.

Finally, I want to underscore our commitment to marshaling all available resources to assist our students who confront issues related to sexual misconduct. Our dedicated Student Affairs staff devote countless hours to educating and counseling our students on issues regarding their

health and safety, and they stand ready to assist whenever students need help.

Teresa A. Sullivan

President

The reaction to her statement was primarily negative, as local and national audiences expected a much more sympathetic response to the sensitive nature of the crimes detailed in the story. A local UVA publication described the faculty stakeholders reacting with “anger and disgust,” while social media accounts from all over displayed “countless ‘I stand with Jackie’ messages” (Rourke & Moran, 2014, para. 15; Ellison, 2015, para. 18). The following day, almost 1,000 students and professors attended a rally in UVA’s campus Amphitheatre to demonstrate their disapproval of UVA’s uncovered rape culture and Sullivan’s lack of punishment (Rourke & Moran, 2014). By November 21, 2014, students had organized a march through campus calling for more action by UVA, and a petition with over 1,000 signatures calling for a suspension and investigation of Greek organizations was delivered to Sullivan’s office (DeBonis & Shapiro, 2014).

On November 22, 2014, Sullivan released another statement on UVA’s website, this time expressing the grave emotion many were expecting in her initial statement:

Dear members of the University Community,

Over the past week many of you have reached out to me directly to offer your opinions, reactions, and suggestions related to combatting sexual violence on Grounds. I want you to know that I have heard you, and that your words have enkindled this message.

At UVA we speak in idealistic terms: honor and tradition inform our thinking, and balance our daily actions. And it is easy here, where success is demanded as much as it is sought, to let our idealism outweigh our reality.

Jefferson, as he always does, provides a compelling backdrop:

It is more honorable to repair a wrong than to persist in it.

The wrongs described in Rolling Stone are appalling and have caused all of us to reexamine our responsibility to this community. Rape is an abhorrent crime that has no place in the world, let alone on the campuses and grounds of our nation's colleges and universities. We know, and have felt very powerfully this week, that we are better than we have been described, and that we have a responsibility to live our tradition of honor every day, and as importantly every night.

As you are aware, I have asked the Charlottesville Police Department to investigate the 2012 assault that is described in Rolling Stone. There are individuals in our community who know what happened that night, and I am calling on them to come forward to the police to report the facts. Only you can shed light on the truth, and it is your responsibility to do so. Alongside this investigation, we as a community must also do a systematic evaluation of our culture to ensure that one of our founding principles— the pursuit of truth – remains a pillar on which we can stand. There is no greater threat to honor than secrecy and indifference.

I write you today in solidarity. I write you in great sorrow, great rage, but most importantly, with great determination. Meaningful change is necessary, and we can lead that change for all universities. We can demand that incidents like those described in Rolling Stone never happen and that if they do, the responsible are held accountable to the law. This will require institutional change, cultural change, and legislative change, and it will not be easy. We are making those changes.

This morning the Inter-Fraternity Council announced that all University fraternities have voluntarily suspended social activities this weekend. This is an important first step, but our challenges will extend beyond this weekend. Beginning immediately, I am suspending all fraternal organizations and associated social activities until January 9th, ahead of the beginning of our spring semester. In the intervening period we will assemble groups of students, faculty, alumni, and other concerned parties to discuss our next steps in preventing sexual assault and sexual violence on Grounds. On Tuesday, the Board of Visitors will meet to discuss the University's policies and procedures regarding sexual assault as well as the specific, recent allegations.

In the words of one student who wrote to me this week, "Policy is needed, but people make change." We need the collective strength of the members of our community to ensure that we have the best policies. So as you prepare for what I hope is a restful Thanksgiving holiday, I hope that you will take time to review and respond to the recently posted Student

Sexual Misconduct Policy, which is currently open for public comment. You may find that policy at [this link](#). Providing candid feedback to this policy is a practical step that you can take to help and I hope that you will.

To our fourth-year students: as you prepare to celebrate your last home football game today, I hope that you will embrace your role as leaders and demonstrate a renewed sense of responsibility to our community, and a renewed commitment to make that community better. It starts today.

Finally, I want to express my grief at hearing the news of the death of second-year student Peter D'Agostino, whose passing adds overwhelming emotion to what has been a difficult semester for all of us.

We are united in our compassion, resolve, and determination: Compassion for survivors of assault; resolve to make our community better; determination to begin to solve this problem here and now.

I hope that you will join me.

Teresa A. Sullivan

President

In contrast to her first statement, she responded passionately to the nature of the wrongdoings described in the Rolling Stone article, saying, “Rape is an abhorrent crime that has no place in the world, let alone on the campuses and grounds of our nation’s colleges and universities. We know, and have felt very powerfully this week, that we are better than we have been described, and that we have a responsibility to live our tradition of honor every day, and as importantly every night.” She went on to outline the

punishments and actions which were called for after her initial statement: she suspended all UVA Greek organizations until January 9, 2014, called for open forums to discuss steps for sexual assault prevention, and promised a review of UVA's sexual assault policies.

Response to the second statement was reported on positively. A student quoted in the Washington Post said that the response to the November 19 statement was a "cry for more action," and affirmed that the November 22 statement was Sullivan responding to that cry (DeBonis & Shapiro, 2014, para. 13). Additionally, the president of the Inter-Fraternity Council stated that the suspension Sullivan called for in her second statement "would 'ultimately benefit our university and the Greek community in the long term'" (DeBonis & Shapiro, 2014, para. 14).

In the weeks and months following the immediate backlash to the Rolling Stone article, the reporting by author Sabrina Rubin Erdely unraveled. Independent journalists as well as newspapers and private organizations discovered holes in the reporting, such as the entire narrative coming from one unnamed source, which inherently lends itself to nearly impossible fact checking. Characters described by Jackie in the story eventually came forward, disclosing their true identities and pointing out flaws, misinterpretations, and outright incorrect reporting about the true goings-on from the evening of Jackie's reported rape (Hartmann, 2015). In the end, the Charlottesville, Virginia, police department announced that they did not find any evidence in their investigation to authenticate Jackie's story. Rolling Stone retracted their story entirely and invited Columbia University to conduct an independent investigation, which revealed that the

reporting in “A Rape on Campus” was errant and neglectful (Coronel, Coll, & Kravitz, 2015).

Though the majority of Jackie’s story was debunked and disproven, the story still acted as a catalyst to start a national conversation about the rape culture cultivated on many universities. This positive outcome is balanced by an equally negative outcome: the slashed reputation of UVA, a school whose identity is historically intertwined with the wisdom and upstanding character of Thomas Jefferson, its founder. UVA was made a mockery of in the time before the article was retracted, and Sullivan was persecuted for a response that many deemed inadequate (DeBonis & Shapiro, 2014). Furthermore, even more than a year after the story was published, UVA’s reputation is still suffering; it’s hard to recall the name “UVA” without conjuring memories of the unpleasant scene depicted by Jackie. In fact, a UVA dean who was prominently featured in the Rolling Stone story filed a lawsuit against the magazine, saying in a statement that she is “forever linked to an article that has damaged (her) reputation” (Jacobs, 2015).

The media putting a megaphone to the mouth of such a sensitive topic makes the issue of the university’s first response even more paramount, as a negative frame from the outset of the crisis could spell disaster for the university (Joslyn, 2003). Sexual assault is to be handled in a different light than other scandals, because not only is a university’s prestigious reputation on the line, the victims are the school’s most important stakeholders: the students. The university involved will almost always come under fire as the media questions its involvement with the case. In a scenario as dark as sexual assault, a university being associated with such a heinous crime must be sure to respond appropriately the first time. There is little room for a second chance at a response, as

Sullivan saw in UVA's instance. Though she made a second statement on November 22, 2014, it had already been framed by her first response on November 19, 2014.

That first response was the one that resulted in public outcry. The lack of emotion, the little empathy, and the unapologetic tone was a recipe for disaster. As Coombs (2007) noted, reputation is largely based on the stakeholders' evaluation of the organization's behavior; specifically, whether or not it met their expectations. Because the key stakeholders (the student body and UVA community as a whole) were expecting an emotional, perhaps even apologetic, response, the November 19 statement was in jarring contrast to their expectations and rejected Aristotle's call for pathos in rhetoric, which MacLeod (2014) said "is the key to influencing human behavior in a crisis" (p. 138). This kind of misstep easily leads to mistrust between the university and its audiences, which seems to have occurred based on the student body's immediate, critical response to the November 19 statement. The article and the university's response to the charges neglected Coombs's (2007) most important aspect of successful crisis response: expressing concern for the victims of the crisis. Sullivan's November 22 statement did a much better job of expressing concern, especially in the tone it evoked. She noted that she was writing in solidarity, and expressed sorrow and rage. She called the rape an "abhorrent crime" and calls for "compassion for survivors of assault." She also chose to mention the unrelated death of UVA student Peter D'Agostino in this statement as opposed to in a separate statement, which was a way for her to show compassion for students on a broader scale than just this Rolling Stone issue.

In terms of content, Coombs (2007) advised on the ethical importance of first including instructions on how stakeholders can avoid any physical threat. Sullivan's

November 19 statement did not start with any instructions or information about whether the students were free from harm. Instead, it simply stated that the nature of the case is private and details could not be openly discussed. A statement expressing a commitment to transparency when legally allowable would have been more effective there, as it is in line with Kim's TTR test (2015). Also, though the November 19 statement mentioned the goal of a safe environment, Sullivan went on to explain various programs aimed at sexual violence prevention as opposed to stating the level of immediate threat to students and what they should do if they feel endangered on campus or, more specifically in this situation, by involvement with Greek organizations or campus nightlife. Such communication would be comforting to students. Instead, the messaging she chose seems to evoke a false sense of comfort padded with the bolstering of various campus programming, which students saw right through. At the time of Sullivan's November 22 statement, she did not outwardly state whether or not the student body was in safe hands. She did inform readers that Greek organizations were being suspended, which might have alleviated students' fears of Greek organizations.

Coombs (2007) also stated that a response to a crisis should inform stakeholders on what's being done to correct the situation. In the November 19 and November 22 statements, respectively, Sullivan clearly outlined what had been done so far to prevent sexual assault and what measures the university had taken since the Rolling Stone article was released. She disclosed the emergence of a formal police investigation, new policies and procedures, and upcoming sexual assault prevention initiatives, which she invited the campus community to become involved in. Sullivan successfully informed stakeholders of the university's attempts to alleviate the harm that was done.

In both of Sullivan's statements, she successfully employed the use of logos and ethos. Logos, using facts and logic to support an argument, was employed with clear language and structure of her statements. She openly listed the facts that she was allowed to share, and she was wise not to rotely list facts that prove the university innocent of allegations that they mishandled Jackie's rape case. Doing so would be a misuse of logos because the presentation of facts would outweigh the ethos and pathos, thus resulting in an ineffective message. Ethos, an appeal to credibility, was achieved because with the highest position of power as president of the university, Sullivan was the most appropriate person to deliver a response to the crisis of this article publication in the eyes of the students. However, as Utz et al. (2013) reported, social media would have been a good accompaniment to this official statement because it signals that the organization is eager and willing to engage in a dialogue with its stakeholders. Furthermore, the social media messages coming from Sullivan's personal account (as opposed to the official UVA account) would have been even more well-received (Snoeijers et al., 2014).

It is important to recognize how the Attribution Theory might come into play in this scenario. Kelley and Michela (1980) state that in terms of crisis communication, an organization who is viewed to have an ongoing problem with crises is more at risk to endure damage to its reputation. Because the Rolling Stone article cites a "rape culture" at UVA, readers can assume that multiple incidents have culminated in a culture. Therefore, Sullivan's November 19 statement should have assumed greater crisis responsibility or disproved this culture at UVA in order to be accepted by UVA's stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Her November 22 statement, which used language like "reexamine our responsibility," indicated that Sullivan was placing a

greater burden of responsibility on UVA and was therefore more accepted by stakeholders.

Finally, in assessing Sullivan's statement with regard to the TTR test (Kim, 2015), we see that her November 19 statement failed the first principle: transparency. Sullivan's statement did not respect the needs of the stakeholders by sharing information with truthfulness, candor, and openness. Additionally, her November 19 statement struck a tone which was not empathetic to rape victims. In terms of two-way symmetrical communication, Sullivan's November 19 statement did not succeed in engaging in a dialogue with stakeholders, nor did Sullivan appear to consider all viewpoints when crafting her response, illustrated clearly by the lack of emotion which was expected from her. However, her November 22 statement did a much better job on both accounts; she asked multiple times for conversation with her stakeholders (reassuring the UVA community that their opinions and reactions inspired the November 22 statement, pleading individuals with information on Jackie's rape to come forward, opening UVA's Student Sexual Misconduct Policy for comments online, and inviting stakeholders to engage in townhall-style meetings for discussion) and finally seemed to understand the viewpoints of her readers. In fact, by stating that the UVA community's "words enkindled this message," she demonstrated a direct appeal to their point of view. The TTR model of communication lastly points to responding immediately in all stages of a crisis. In the crisis of the Rolling Stone article causing public uproar, Sullivan succeeded in appropriate timing of her response. Her first statement was issued the same day that the article was published online, and her follow-up statement appeared within two days of that.

Although Sullivan seemed to redeem herself and the university with her second statement, the one issued on November 19 created a poor first impression in light of this crisis. She failed her stakeholders and received backlash, and had to clarify with a follow-up statement. However, even when the entire article was retracted for failed journalism and reporting practices, UVA still saw a damaged reputation (Jacobs, 2015). This demonstrates the importance of an extremely sensitive response to the crisis of the media reporting on sexual assault at a university. The university in question cannot respond with traditional public relations tactics, which Sullivan attempted in her November 19 statement: giving only the information she knew for certain, not showing strong emotion, avoiding giving away too much, taking a defensive stance to protect the organization, and advocating the positive features of the university (such as the rape-prevention programs in place).

In such a sensitive and rare crisis, the traditional fallbacks of public relations will not serve the university's reputation as effectively. Furthermore, in a situation where the reputation is already at stake thanks to a media exposé, the university cannot afford to make an incorrect judgement in their first response, lest they disadvantage themselves from the outset. The following section of this paper reimagines UVA's first response from multiple channels, demonstrating a more effective and reputation-preserving approach based on the literature.

Recommended UVA Crisis Response

As this paper has demonstrated, for a university involved in a sexual assault scandal and faced with the crisis of unrelenting media attention, the appropriate first response is critical. The school's initial response to media attention and speculation is the

one that sets the tone for how it will be portrayed and how its reputation will be affected. In the case of UVA and Rolling Stone, the first response by Teresa Sullivan did not meet stakeholders' expectations. Though UVA attempted to revise their approach in a follow-up statement, unfortunately, their reputation had already been negatively impacted.

This section aims to reimagine UVA's initial response to the media whirlwind surrounding the Rolling Stone story about "Jackie" and rape culture on campus. Some of Sullivan's words were appropriate in context, but poorly timed; such words are used in the reimagined responses and italicized to give credit. Additionally, UVA did not give an initial response to the Rolling Stone story with unique verbiage on their social media accounts. UVA's official Twitter and Facebook accounts did share links to Sullivan's official statement on the UVA website, but Sullivan's personal accounts had no relevant tweets or posts (UVA, 2014; University of Virginia, 2014). However, the following sample responses include Twitter- and Facebook-specific responses, which show that the university and relevant university personnel are eager to provide information and enter in a dialogue with stakeholders (Snoeiijers et al., 2014, p. 42).

Official Statement

The official statement is the overarching viewpoint of the University as a whole. It would be published the same day as the Rolling Stone magazine article publication, both on UVA's website and referenced in social media communications from official UVA accounts and those of UVA administrators. The press would be instructed to use the official statement as UVA's "comment" on the situation. It would be accepted as UVA's unified stance on the crisis, and would read as follows:

To the University Community:

I am writing with regard to a Rolling Stone magazine article that was released today depicting horrific acts of sexual violence against one of our own. I am writing with *great sorrow*, with *great rage*, but with *great determination* to address the despicable wrong of rape culture on college campuses.

The victim in the Rolling Stone article has described an *abhorrent crime*, one which *has no place in the world, let alone on the campuses and grounds of our nation's colleges and universities*. Jackie, we stand with you. You have suffered an indescribable offense, but you are not alone. UVA pledges to handle these claims with the utmost diligence that they demand.

Students, please be aware that the University knows of no specific, present danger at this time. I have called upon the Charlottesville Police Department to investigate this 2012 assault, and to the best of the administration's knowledge, there is no immediate threat against the safety of our students with regard to this article. If any student should feel afraid, threatened, or endangered at any time, contact the Campus Security Office, the Office of Student Affairs, or visit the website at <http://www.virginia.edu/sexualviolence/> to talk to someone. Every voice will be heard. Every concern is valid.

In light of this article, it is the duty of the UVA community to *reexamine our responsibility* in the allegation of a rape culture on our campus. In coordination with police investigation, *we as a community*

must also do a systematic evaluation of our culture to ensure that one of our founding principles– the pursuit of truth – remains a pillar on which we can stand. There is no greater threat to honor than secrecy and indifference, and with that in mind, I ask anyone with information about Jackie’s horrible experience to bring it to the police.

The administration is pledging to investigate, and change, if needed, our policies in order to prevent the reported instances of neglect from ever becoming commonplace. We have been updating our *Student Sexual Misconduct Policy, which is open for public comment [at this link](#)*. We hope that you will help us make a change by providing your comments and thoughts.

Furthermore, *beginning immediately, I am investigating all fraternal organizations and associated social activities. In the intervening period between now and the beginning of spring semester, we will assemble groups of students, faculty, alumni, and other concerned parties to discuss our next steps in preventing sexual assault and sexual violence on Grounds. On Tuesday, the Board of Visitors will meet to discuss the University’s policies and procedures regarding sexual assault as well as the specific, recent allegations.* I invite you to follow my Twitter and Facebook accounts for frequent updates as we move forward in solving this problem.

I would like to conclude by pledging transparency and truthfulness as we move forward to address the improvements our community must

make. Some details of the cases mentioned may not be permissible to expand upon due to *federal and state privacy laws*, but as an administration we will strive to provide the community with as much information as possible.

Please, join me in examining this issue. *We are united in our compassion, resolve, and determination: Compassion for survivors of assault; resolve to make our community better; determination to begin to solve this problem here and now.*

Teresa A. Sullivan

President

This reimagined official statement is a more effective message from UVA administration to anyone following the media whirlwind after the Rolling Stone article. First, the statement should be released immediately following the Rolling Stone article's publication online. This timing coupled with the promise of frequent updates fulfills one of the three principles of Kim's TTR model of crisis communication, which entails prompt response to the crisis and throughout the crisis's life cycle (Kim, 2015).

The message as a whole employs the three modes of persuasion in rhetoric, ethos, logos, and pathos, thus lending itself to "successful communication" according to MacLeod (2014, p. 137). Ethos is established simply with the position of the message's writer, that of University President. In the eyes of the stakeholders, someone in a position of power, such as Sullivan, would be most credible to make claims about changes. Logos was employed, much like with Sullivan's real statements after the incident, with clear language and logical explanation of what facts were available at the time. However, the

pathos that was lacking in Sullivan's real November 19 statement is present in this reimagined statement with numerous appeals to empathy. This statement uses emotionally-charged language expressing sympathy for the victim and disgust with rape, which gives an empathetic nod to Jackie. Furthermore, Sullivan displays empathy on multiple levels: with the UVA community as a whole, with UVA students, and then directly to the victim by saying, "Jackie, we stand with you." Directly addressing the victim around which this crisis revolves is an extremely personal appeal to empathy, which is effective. According to MacLeod (2014), the culmination of all three modes of persuasion plus empathy results in a crisis communication that is most effective in delivering a message and is key to influencing behavior.

It is important to note that this reimagined official statement begins by addressing the physical and psychological well-being of the victim, Jackie, which is ethical according to Coombs (2007). Additionally, this statement informs stakeholders that they are not in any immediate danger but gives information on what to do if they feel endangered regardless, or at any time. These instructions to stakeholders on how they can avoid physical threat are in line with Coombs's recommendations as well (2007), and is something Sullivan's real November 19 statement was missing, aside from a brief sentence linking to UVA's sexual assault web page.

Perhaps most importantly, this reimagined official statement displays the proper amount of empathy for the victim, Jackie, and anyone who could have been affected by a rape culture on campus. As discussed earlier in this paper, the main problem with Sullivan's real November 19 statement was the lack of empathy. Some of Sullivan's phrasing from her real November 22 statement, however, was reused here, as that

statement finally showed the emotion stakeholders were expecting. According to Coombs (2007), stakeholders expect an expression of concern in a crisis. This reimagined official statement includes concern and sympathy with strong, emotional language.

This statement also balances the fine line between using messaging which accepts crisis responsibility, but doesn't necessarily put the blame on UVA. One must remember that the Rolling Stone article was later discounted entirely, proving that at least some of Jackie's claims were false (Coronel et al., 2015). However, Coombs (2007) made it clear that in the face of a crisis, it would be unethical to place the matter of blame ahead of an expression of sympathy for the victims. Thus, this statement reuses the language from the real November 22 statement which infers a greater burden of responsibility on UVA to fix the problem of rape culture and get to the bottom of Jackie's rape case, although not necessarily taking full blame for the alleged rape and indicting the university. Using language like "investigate," and "make changes if needed" achieve this measure. Approaching the messaging in this way fulfills the appropriate crisis response according to SCCT (Coombs, 2006) and is thus more accepted by stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2001).

As recommended by Coombs (2007), at the end of this reimagined statement, Sullivan gives an indication of how UVA is taking steps to correct the situation, something she did successfully in the real November 22 statement. However, including this information in the initial statement after displaying the expected sympathy is key to setting a tone of respect for the victim and corrective action moving forward. Sullivan also pledges to be transparent through the remainder of the crisis's life cycle, which fulfills another principle of Kim's TTR test (2015) and shows a respect for the needs of

the stakeholders at every level, as stakeholders ranging from the current UVA student to the UVA donors will be looking for a satisfying response from Sullivan. Openness and straightforwardness, according to Kelsay (2007), are also key crisis responses expected by the stakeholder groups of prospective students and their parents. Additionally, the reimagined statement borrows verbiage from the real November 22 statement which asks for comments on the sexual misconduct policy. Such two-way symmetrical communication between Sullivan and the stakeholders completes the TTR test by inviting readers to engage in a dialogue (Kim, 2015). Sullivan's invitation to follow her social media accounts is another way to invite two-way communication, as social media would be used as a means of engaging stakeholders in prompt communication throughout the remainder of the crisis (Snoeijers et al., 2014; Kim, 2015)

Facebook Post and Tweet from Teresa Sullivan

In the real UVA scenario, social media was not used except to share a link to the real November 19 and November 22 statements by UVA's official Facebook and Twitter accounts. This indicates that although UVA places an importance on social media as a tool for sharing information, it wasn't being used to its fullest advantage, which would benefit the university's reputation in the end (Snoeijers et al., 2014, p. 648). The reimagined statements would include social media as a means to disseminate the official statement on the UVA website, while furthering the official statement's goals of stakeholder satisfaction and effective messaging. The initial Facebook statement, published from Sullivan's personal page immediately after the official statement is published online and then shared to the UVA page, would read:

Students, staff, and UVA community: a tragic crime has been reported in Rolling Stone magazine this week, and it involves one of our own students. I am deeply saddened to hear what this victim has endured and I am committed to investigating and making necessary changes. Official statements moving forward will be published to the UVA website, and my most recent statement is at [this link](#). I invite you to check my Facebook and Twitter accounts periodically as I update the UVA community on how we will continue to fight the problem of rape culture.

In this reimagined crisis response, social media would be used more proactively to signal that UVA and Sullivan are “eager to inform... stakeholders quickly and directly and... willing to engage in a dialogue with them” (Utz et al., 2013, p. 42). Again, the initial Facebook posts with regard to this crisis should come from Teresa Sullivan’s personal account with the intent of being shared by the University’s official account because, as Snoeijers et al. (2014) discovered, a message on social media coming from the Dean’s personal account garners more reactions than one shared from a university’s official page, which fulfills the goal of two-way symmetrical discussion mentioned above (Kim, 2015). In this case, Sullivan being the President as opposed to the Dean would not make a significant impact on the overall effect of the messaging. Because this initial message is shared from Sullivan’s personal account, it would likely gain more discussion online and be shared more due to its emotional nature (Snoeijers et al., 2014) and inherently invites two-way communication by the very nature of Facebook’s tools and abilities for commenting and re-sharing. It also invites open dialogue by promising updates as the crisis progresses.

Twitter should be used in a similar fashion to Facebook, but with the understanding that Twitter's functionality only allows for 140 characters to be published at a time. Snoeijers et al. (2014) contradicted earlier assumptions about Twitter by proving that students responded more to emotional language than to instructional language, so a similar tone would be employed in a Tweet, once again coming from Sullivan's account and being retweeted by UVA's account:

A disturbing story has painted a brutal picture of rape culture on college campuses. I am pledging to investigate.

<https://news.virginia.edu/content/important-message-president-sullivan-addressing-sexual-misconduct>

Because Twitter's algorithm automatically shortens URLs, the above Tweet would meet exactly the number of allotted characters. Though it is not as pressing to this project, it should be noted that forthcoming information as the situation unfolds should be tweeted, similar to the way UVA's Facebook would share future updates.

Conclusion

Protecting a university's reputation from a media whirlwind surrounding sexual assault incidents is a specific variety of crisis. The university is immediately at the center of a situation which requires diligent crisis communication. Stakeholders including students, staff, alumni, donors, prospective students, and surrounding community demand a response that fulfills their expectations of the organization. If the organization fails to meet these expectations in their communications, their reputation could be irreparably damaged.

One such instance of a damaged reputation was outlined in the case study of UVA and Rolling Stone magazine article in 2014. When the media gave the story an elevated platform to reach a broad audience, UVA had one chance to make a lasting first impression. Unfortunately, they mishandled their opportunity and disappointed stakeholders by failing to meet their expectations. Their poor crisis communication, which has been analyzed in this project, resulted in their damaged reputation.

Fortunately, there is research to dictate how a university can communicate effectively in this particular crisis situation. It includes effectively employing Aristotle's three modes of persuasion; utilizing the transparency, timeliness, and two-way symmetrical communication; accepting the appropriate degree of crisis responsibility; and more. This project has outlined how to balance the experts' recommended means of crisis communication with a sample response from UVA after the Rolling Stone magazine article crisis.

This project has outlined the best practices of effective crisis communication in a sexual assault allegation against a university, which can result in protecting a university's reputation.

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