

**Why didn't the watch dog bark?: Metanarration's Role in Restructuring
Perceptions of Risk and Crisis**

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Abstract

This study proposes a metanarration model for studying organizational crisis communication from a narrative perspective. Specifically, organizational messages are divided into the stages of primary narrative and secondary narrative as the organizations seek to reconstruct the crisis event for their relevant public. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) multiple responses to accusations that it failed to properly respond to the Ford/Firestone case are analyzed using the metanarration model. We conclude that NHTSA was able to effectively reconstruct the narrative associated with its failure in a manner that created exigency for enhancing, rather than punishing, the organization.

During organizational crisis, competing versions of failures and their causes arise. To convey its perspective of the crisis, an organization publicly responds to the story that has been communicated to stakeholders, most often by the news media. Possible response strategies range from denial to corrective action (Benoit, 1995; Hearit, 1995; Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer, 1998). This study explores one possible manner of responding to preexisting constructions of crises: metanarration. As the prefix *meta* means after or beyond, metanarration can be understood as narration that arises after or extends the understanding of the initial primary narrative. An organization uses metanarration as a response strategy when it reconstructs an initial story of what took place during a crisis incident. In an effort to protect image or reputation, organizations often attempt to change the primary narrative of what took place during a crisis not by negating the story, but rather by retelling the story in a more favorable way. The reconstructed narrative, or metanarrative, allows the organization to tell the crisis story from its own perspective and respond accordingly.

Metanarration is worthy of study because it provides a deeper understanding of how narrative is used in organizational practice, and how stories are reconstructed to fit organizational purposes. Exploring the use of metanarratives may also allow the development of response strategies the organizations have not previously explored. This article will propose a model of

metanarration for understanding organizational crisis and apply this model to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) role in the Ford/Firestone tire failure crisis. To accomplish this goal, we will first examine crisis as a contested discursive construct, second view the response offered by the federal regulatory agency in charge of tire safety, NHTSA, as a form of metanarration, and third draw conclusions and discuss implications.

The Narrative Perspective

Metanarration can best be understood within the context of narrative. Recognition "of the importance of narrative in the context of interpretation and meaning-making" has resulted in increased research in a variety of fields and formats (Perkins and Blyer, 1999, p. 5). Literature theories of narration led to understanding storytelling in a communication sense. Martin (1986) explained that "between the story and the reader is the narrator, who controls what will be told and how it will be perceived" (p. xx). Narratives are means for communicating meaning and perspective to an audience (Martin, 1986).

When describing the narrative paradigm, Walter Fisher (1984) explained that the narrative perspective "has relevance to real as well as fictive worlds, to stories of living and to stories of the imagination" (p.1). Here Fisher implies that reason and rationality can be found in the symbolic interaction of storytelling. Fisher (1987) advances the idea that "good communication is good by virtue of its

satisfying the requirements of narrative rationality, namely that it offers a reliable, trustworthy guide to belief and action” (p. 95).

While attention has been given to how humans construct stories to describe their existence (Abbott, 1992; Hamel, 2000), organizations also take part in the interaction of meaning by constructing narratives (Czarniawska, 1998; Browning, 1991, Richardson, 2000). In fact, narratives are key in helping organizations function (Barton and Barton, 1988), are the most effective means of building trusting relationships with stakeholders (Taylor and Wacker, 1997), and are requisite for organizational change and innovation (Perkins and Blyler, 1999).

The process of meaning creation through narration is also clearly evident when organizations are struggling to make sense of threatening situations in order to survive. Organizations attempt to make sense of complex environments for themselves and their stakeholders (Frost & Cooke, 1999; Scott & Lane, 2000). Narratives can be created by establishing a consistent discourse capable of finding resonance with individuals’ experiences (both direct and mediated) (Hay, 1995). If the organization is successful in its construction of shared meaning, the narrative becomes predominant, and is presumed to be a correct interpretation of reality. Any story that advances an alternate interpretation and competes with a dominant construction of reality must overcome that construction’s presumed correctness to gain acceptance (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969).

In sum, reality is socially constructed. Advocates use arguments in a dialectic to construe events into a consistent, cogent vision of the events. This construction of reality is entirely dependent on communicating an interpretation of reality that is capable of finding resonance in society, as well as organizational communities, while helping to explain and predict future findings. During the crisis, organizations often attempt to control what will be told and how it will be perceived. In some cases, organizations turn to story telling to explain the nature of the problem, and to respond to it. Not only does narration serve an epistemological role, but also the construction of narratives and metanarratives provide rhetorical devices used to contest unfavorable reports in crisis situations (Hay, 1995).

The Role of Metanarration in Reconstructing Crisis

A Model of Metanarration

The metanarrative model begins with identification of the failure, or failures, that lead to the crisis. To accurately analyze narrative messages from organizations during periods of crisis, understanding the distinction between failure and crisis is essential. Failure and crisis are not synonymous. Failure is a negative event, or events, that can be seen as preconditions or symptoms of crisis (Hay, 1995). Failure is necessary but insufficient to be labeled crisis. On the other hand, crisis is defined as "specific, unexpected, and non-routine events or series of events that [create] high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived

threat to an organization's high-priority goals" (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 1998, p. 233). Hay (1996) describes crisis as not merely the "accumulation of contradiction but rather a moment of transition, a moment of decisive intervention" (p. 253). The organization must change in order to survive or move forward (Meyers & Holusha, 1986; Murphy, 1996). Thus, crisis is a process of transformation where the old system can no longer be maintained.

Crisis is not an objective condition to which responses must be oriented, but rather, it is a contested discursive construct. Organizational reconstitution and change do not happen in the wake of the crisis moment, but in the very process in which the crisis is interpreted (Hay, 1996). During a crisis, organizations must attempt to make sense of the situation for themselves and their stakeholders (Frost & Cooke, 1999; Scott & Lane, 2000).

To understand and respond to crisis, organizations often attempt to make sense of the crisis by restructuring the primary narrative, thus creating a metanarrative. During the establishment of the metanarration, newsworthy events (failures) are sampled and encoded with meaning, responsibility is attributed, and the events are reordered. The metanarration must be abstract enough to allow for the explanation of newly discovered failures, and must be capable of shifting blame (e.g. a criminal act is not caused by the failure of an individual, but by the failure of the state, or loss of society's morality). Colin Hay (1995) explains that the success of the newly narrated construction relies not on its ability to

accurately reflect causation and effects, but in its ability to provide a simplified account that is sufficiently flexible to narrate symptoms while attributing causality and responsibility. If the organization is successful in its reconstruction, this alternate construction of crisis is then mediated, and these abstractions are confirmed when each new symptom is assimilated into the metanarrative. The new narrative becomes predominant, and the crisis becomes lived in those terms. Responses to crisis are ultimately directed at the mediated and filtered construction of crisis.

Metanarration of Crisis Model

Failure → Media Reports (Newsworthy Event) → Primary Narration →
Abstraction and Secondary Narration → Reconstruction of the Crisis →
Responses

Reconstructing a crisis can be achieved by narrating the symptoms of failure into a coherent discourse capable of finding and constructing resonance with individuals' experiences (both direct and mediated) of the context. For example, in the tire crisis, NHTSA needed to establish a story that adequately explained their role in the situation, and made sense to their stakeholders. If it simply responded that Firestone is to blame, then it would be ignoring consumers' direct experiences (the blowouts are happening on Ford vehicles) and mediated

experiences (the government body responsible for preventing this crisis did nothing).

In many cases, organizations allow the media to construct the story and then respond to that report. Typical to image restoration strategies, these responses take a retrospective or passive perspective of the events. The potential responses are best explained by William Benoit's typology (1995a, 1995b). Benoit's typology offers five strategies for responding to the primary narration: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing the offensiveness of the act, correcting the wrong, and mortification. The reason that most organizations take this retrospective approach is often explained by the concept of strategic ambiguity. If an organization chooses to initiate metanarration, the response must be sufficiently flexible to narrate all of the failures, and therefore, it will attempt to use ambiguity as a strategic device to gain time and flexibility (Sellnow & Ulmer, 1995). Some organizations will also simply respond to the primary narration created by the media because it then does not have to self-disclose the full extent of the failure.

While the typology offers a means for intricate analysis of crisis response related to image restoration, the typology does not focus on how organizations create a secondary narration to restructure reality. Also, the typology assumes that the organization is attempting to directly counter the image attack or loss of legitimacy. In NHTSA's case, the governing body accepted failure, and

responded to the media's narration indirectly; however, the typology assumes a direct response.

Hearit (1994, 1995) extended Benoit's work by explaining that an organization can distance itself from crisis through appearance/reality disassociation. The organization claims that initial reports might seem bad, but in reality, the situation is not as grim as it appears. This disassociation resembles the creation of a secondary narration; however, this strategy relies on denial and disputing the facts; the forming of a secondary narration, conversely, involves reconstructing the primary narration without arguing the material evidence.

NHTSA's Use of Metanarration

A single crisis can foster sufficient ambiguity and uncertainty to span multiple agencies. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), Ford and Firestone were all faced with the need to construct meaning in a threatening situation when reports of tires failing on Ford vehicles began to surface. NHTSA, as the regulating agency overseeing motor vehicle safety, faced a turning point when national reports of the Ford/Firestone tire failures began to emerge. National news attention did not arise until 2000 despite numerous related accidents during the 1990s (Wald and Bradsher, 2000).

These accidents claimed at least 148 lives and resulted in innumerable injuries, even though data about these accidents were available to Firestone in 1992, and to Ford as early as 1989 (AP, January 9, 2001). As reports of deaths

and accidents did begin to surface, Ford blamed Firestone for manufacturing faulty tires, and Firestone blamed Ford for recommending improper tire inflation levels. While focus has been placed on Ford and Firestone during the tire crisis, and their subsequent battle to place blame on one another, little attention has been given to the government regulatory agency responsible for preventing these accidents, NHTSA.

During a joint Commerce Consumer Protection subcommittee hearing, Representative Bobby Rush (2000) of Illinois argued that the crisis was propagated by NHTSA's failure to regulate. Colorado representative Diana DeGette (2000) told that "NHTSA ignored warning signs" that ultimately allowed the problem to spread. This regulatory agency's involvement in the crisis provides an opportunity to explore the role of metanarration in crisis management.

In the Ford/Firestone case, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration clearly failed, but their failures did not become a crisis until Congress called. NHTSA was operating normally until asked to testify about its role in preventing (or failing to prevent) Firestone tire failures. As NHTSA Administrator, Dr. Sue Bailey (2000) told Congress, that given the same information, "clearly [NHTSA] would respond differently today."

The National Highway Safety Administration's metanarration takes form during Dr. Bailey's live testimony during the joint committee hearings. This event provided NHTSA its first opportunity to formally respond to the primary

narration. Dr. Bailey establishes the metanarration by providing an explanation capable of accounting for the failures in this case. The secondary narration assigns responsibility in a way that allows the organization to change, while saving face.

The prodromal stage of crisis is characterized by symptoms manifesting themselves so that the organization could recognize that failure occurred (Fink, 1986). In other words, there are sufficient indicators that failure exists, and that crisis is imminent. In this case, the prodromal stage of the tire crisis began when Firestone tires mounted on certain Ford vehicles lost their tread while travelling at high speeds, and accidents were reported. The testimony during the joint committee hearing indicates that Ford, Firestone, and NHTSA had gathered reports about Firestone ATX tires losing their tread, particularly in hot climates. The chair of the joint committee stated,

we have also learned that this information was compiled and available to Firestone from the year 1992 through the current. And that none of this information was shared with NHTSA, nor was it apparently requested by NHTSA from Firestone until the investigation began following the [media reports]. . . and consumer complaints to NHTSA by telephone (2000).

In fact, the testimony later accuses the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration of receiving a report from State Farm Insurance indicating a trend of tire failures on Ford sport utility vehicles.

Unfortunately, the crisis was not prevented, but was allowed to intensify. A Houston television station special report articulated the symptoms of the crisis to the public. This report was heralded by Congress as sparking national media attention, and creating a public awareness of the problem. Chair of the Commerce Consumer Protection Subcommittee, Representative Billy Tauzin (2000), while arguing that the news story is “extraordinarily relevant and important,” explained that

this video was the genesis of the original phone calls by consumers to NHTSA which then prompted . . . the investigation that lead to the eventual decision to recall the Firestone tires in question. Therefore, this video is of extreme importance because it was indeed the catalyst for the recall that has indeed begun this year, and for the investigation that continues both at NHTSA and in this committee and on the Senate side.

This video represents, according to Congress, the primary narration of the Firestone crisis.

The Houston television station’s report, and subsequent media attention, established the first arrangement of the crisis. The media’s construction indicated that treads were separating from Firestone tires mounted on Ford sport utility vehicles, leading to dangerous situations. In fact, the phenomenon was so dangerous that people were dying. A former NHTSA Director argued in the broadcast that both Ford and Firestone were to blame, as she stated, “Ford ordered

these tires to put on these vehicles.” The consensus seemed to be that neither Ford nor Firestone were adequately responding to this disaster. This primary narration, although changed slightly over time, was able to articulate the failures and assign blame. Because of the story’s coherence and fidelity, it gained presumption, and all further accounts of the crisis were judged through the lens of this narration.

NHTSA was not mentioned in this primary construction, but would soon find itself in the middle of the crisis. When Congressional research was conducted, investigators discovered that State Farm Insurance had sent a memo to NHTSA pointing to this tire failure trend, but the national regulatory agency ignored the memo and did nothing. Representative Tom Bliley (2000) admonished NHTSA when he proclaimed,

Despite the jump in claims, despite the severity of accidents, despite the growing death toll, no one at NHTSA reacted until a Houston television report on these allegations, in February of this year, prompted them to open an investigation in May, which in turn prompted the recall action by Firestone. NHTSA's attempts to justify the lack of earlier action ring hollow. Transportation Secretary Slater recently confronted by the media about the State Farm warnings in its own database of dozens of similar claims, responded that the total number of claims was small and did not involve any fatalities. I'm sure that the American people are glad to note

that our safety agency waits until someone dies before launching an investigation into defective products. But as the committee uncovered from NHTSA's own files, the regional State Farm referral to NHTSA did include two fatalities. So not only were [Department of Transportation] Secretary Slater's comments insensitive, they were simply wrong as well. After this evidence was discovered, and when the major players in the crisis appeared to be doing little to meet public demand, Congress scheduled hearings. Through her testimony, Sue Bailey represented NHTSA and attempted to explain its role in the debacle. As previously mentioned, when Congress called, the crisis began for the agency for it could no longer continue to operate in the same manner and avoid congressional fury.

At this point, NHTSA was looking for a strategy that effectively met Congress's concerns while avoiding public disdain. The agency was able to use abstraction to create a secondary narration sufficiently flexible to explain the failures, and to assign blame in a manner that would allow it to survive relatively unscathed.

During questioning, Dr. Bailey explained that NHTSA's tire testing protocols have not changed since their creation in 1968. The organization had planned to adjust the rules in 1978, but did not. Also, current rules mandate that tires are speed tested at an inflation level of 32 pounds per square inch (psi). Ford recommended inflating the Firestone tires to 26 psi. Therefore, the tires were

never tested at the recommended inflation level. Also limiting the agency's ability to predict the problem was its decision to abandon close working relationships with auto repair garages. Previously, NHTSA was able to gather useful data concerning repair rates, and possible defects before a national crisis would develop. Now, according to Bailey (2000), "NHTSA is short on information" and must "rely on consumer reports." Through her detailing of the ineffective rules that NHTSA had created for itself, Sue Bailey was engaged in metanarration. Ford and Firestone did fail, and NHTSA did nothing to prevent that failure because the rules were ineffective.

The reconstruction of the narration parallels strategies of defeasibility. NHTSA had followed all the rules, but the rules were inappropriate. However, NHTSA could not rely on defeasibility as a direct response because the rules are their own, and so it accepted the initial reports and sought to retell the story. After the reconstruction, NHTSA's role had moved from "NHTSA could have prevented these deaths" to "NHTSA was handcuffed by its own bad rules." The agency was then obligated to respond to this secondary narration.

The metanarration clearly puts the regulatory agency in a more favorable position. Dr. Bailey's continued testimony outlines the ways that the agency will change to prevent further failures. The central theme that Administrator Bailey returns to consistently is that the rules are being reviewed at this time, and that changes will be submitted for approval in the spring. This strategy was

demonstrated, for instance, when she responded to an attack focused on the poor tire testing. She said, “that is the current tire standard testing, and that is one of the things clearly that we need to review and is being updated at this time, and we have a proposal that will be out in the spring.” Each time that she used this response, the questioner accepted the answer and moved on. In essence, the position of “we failed, and we will change to prevent future failure” leaves little room for continued attack. There is marginal utility in continually pointing out that the organization failed, if it already accepts that premise. There is nothing left to attack.

Not only did the metanarrative act to shield NHTSA from attack, but a significant turn also occurred. After hearing Dr. Bailey’s reconstruction of the crisis, Congress shifted from a position of accusation to anticipating future correction. Ironically, this shift initiated a discussion of how best to help NHTSA prevent similar crises in the future. Ultimately NHTSA did not face punitive actions, such as budget cuts, but rather enjoyed discussion of budget increases and enhanced regulatory power. This shift is evident in the following quotations from testimony.

The Joint Committee members’ change from attack to empowerment operated on two levels. First, Congressional members explored increasing NHTSA’s regulatory power. As Rep. Fred Upton asked “How is it that we can do a better job at getting NHTSA to get both claims and warrantee – both accidents

as well as claims – reported routinely to NHTSA as you look at future recalls or future incidents of problems.” Rep. Edward Markey further supported increased authority by saying “I don’t think that there is a more important public safety issue than reversing what the Senate has already done in trying to prohibit you from ensuring that all consumers know what the danger is in driving these SUVs.”

Second, the committee discussed increasing NHTSA’s budget allocation. Rep. John Dingell helps to explain how budget restraints have limited NHTSA’s ability to respond to this crisis. He stated, “NHTSA is trying to cope with a much larger and more complex regulatory burden that it had in ’78, but your budget now is approximately one third of that which you had at that time.” Clearly, NHTSA was no longer struggling to survive under the weight of a Congressional inquiry. Rather, it was being helped to change to meet future needs.

The power of the reconstructed narrative was further evidenced when Congress called NHTSA back to testify before the Senate Commerce Committee. Sen. Rockefeller highlighted both forms of empowerment identified by the joint committee. He first argued that “Chairman McCain has done a very correct thing in having us all sign this letter asking for something that was taken out of appropriations to be put back in, both last year and this year.” He later continued, “You do complain of lack of regulatory authority ... We routinely don’t do anything about it. Now, I think under Chairman McCain we are about to do something about that.” Sen. John McCain concluded very positively for NHTSA

by saying, “Let’s work on this legislation, and let’s also try and work together on seeing what additional funds that are necessary to prevent this from ever occurring again.”

Conclusions and Implications

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration was able to successfully defend itself against congressional attacks through the creation of metanarrative. The organization took existing accounts of the crisis that had gained acceptance (the primary narration), and reconstructed them using a new perspective so that a more favorable account (the metanarration) could be established.

NHTSA’s retold story was sufficiently flexible to account for pre-existing and potential future failures. The organization highlighted changes in the system it proposed to undertake in orders to prevent the problem from remanifesting. Congress accepted this explanation, and the organization, while reprimanded, was not the target of punitive legislation. Rather, NHTSA was allowed to modify its own policies from the inside.

This analysis of NHTSA’s role in the Firestone tire crisis provides a new perspective on how organizations argue. NHTSA went beyond typical strategies of image restoration. Therefore, the application of metanarrative, and strategic uses of storytelling and ambiguity, in crisis communication is warranted as a potential means for shifting focus to a more favorable context. This work provides

a model that describes the formation of metanarrative, and allows application to many differing contexts.

This study also supports the claim that a clear distinction is made between failure and crisis. Crisis need not be seen as a particular threatening event. Rather, crisis is a discursive construct. And that construction of reality can be, and often is, contested. Future research on crisis, no matter what method is employed, can benefit from considering this distinction.

The preponderance of organizational crisis literature advocates a proactive approach to crisis management. Most crisis management planning is designed to provide immediate explanation for the crisis. This study suggests that this type of planning, although appropriate in the initial stages of a crisis, fails to account for an organization's potential to restructure the crisis event via metanarration. Organizations, if they assume that their response to a crisis is complete after they respond to initial accounts of the failure, may miss an opportunity to reconstruct the crisis in a more favorable way. Metanarration thus provides a means of understanding what is happening in the chronic and resolution stages of crisis.

Further, when organizations are engaged in the construction of narratives, they are inherently engaged in the creation and manipulation of knowledge. The organization is not simply manipulating the facts of the case to protect its image. Rather, it is asking the audience to view the story from a different (more

favorable) perspective. This shift in point of view necessarily changes the way that the audience understands the crisis. Knowledge is inherently linked to perspective-taking, but that link, in this context, is not yet fully understood. More research must be done on the epistemological function of organizational story telling.

Obviously, not only individuals participate in the forming of stories to construct meaning. Organizations also attempt to make sense of reality by using narratives. In times of crisis, organizations can attempt to reconstruct a primary narrative through the use of metanarration. As Walter Fisher explained, meaning is sequenced, often to meet some strategic need. In this case, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's strategic need was to reorganize the way the tire crisis had been narrated. Its effective use of metanarration allowed the organization to answer congress's attacks, and to survive.

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