ROLE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) IN SURVIVING A CRISIS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

By

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To my parents, for your unconditional love and support; and to Dr. Mitrook, for your unwavering encouragement and help.
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ROLE OF CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR) IN SURVIVING A CRISIS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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We conducted a comparative content analysis of both Exxon and BP’s media coverage during a crisis to determine how favorably each company was portrayed. Generally, research has shown the better a reputation an organization has prior to a crisis, the more sympathetic the media are toward the company in terms of coverage. Using a quantitative content analysis of 211 newspaper articles over the period of one year, the tone of media coverage, CSR portrayal, news sources and media frames were analyzed. We found that although the coverage of BP became more positive earlier in the crisis, there was no identifiable pattern that the tone of media coverage in a crisis changes over time.

We also found that the media predominantly used primary news frames, such as health, human interest, the economy and the environment. Furthermore, we found that the media relied mainly on corporate and government sources. Finally, both Exxon and BP were equally portrayed as being both socially responsible and irresponsible, leading to the conclusion that there was no significant difference in the amount of favorable media coverage a socially responsible company received during a crisis.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Too often, management makes decisions without considering the consequences of those decisions... When management makes such decisions, many publics develop into activist groups who actively oppose the organization. Opposition typically results in litigation, legislation, regulation, and negative publicity that cost the organization a great deal of money. Even if publics do not organize to oppose decisions, management has a responsibility to alleviate negative consequences of its actions—such as pollution, risky products, discrimination, economic hardship, or a dangerous workplace. Recognizing and alleviating these consequences is the essence of social responsibility, and the public relations function is the management champion of social responsibility (Lamb & McKee, 2006, p. 34).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been a topic of increasing interest to many and has been firmly placed on the global public policy agenda. It has been argued that governments and their international economic organizations have “failed in their attempts to rid the planet of under-development and poverty” (Hopkins, 2006, ¶1). As a result, many organizations such as the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), a Geneva-based global association of companies, have been created with the goal of providing businesses all over the world the opportunity to contribute to sustainable human progress, as well as a sustainable future for developing nations and nations in transition (World Business Council for Sustainable Development, 2008).

Although no formal definition of corporate social responsibility (CSR) exists, the WBCSD defines it as “the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the local community and society at large” (WBCSD, 1999, p. 3). The European Commission defines CSR as “a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interactions with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis” (Newell & Frynas, 2007, p. 673). Esler (2007) asserts that “the CSR acronym, a catch-all for everything from clean, green practices to ethical behavior and nurturing employees,
might be summed up in the word ‘sustainability’” (p. 4). In light of this, CSR has also been called corporate sustainability and corporate citizenship (Fox, 2007). Taking into account that CSR is supposed to contribute to sustainable development, it is important to note the three main principles of sustainability: profits, people and the planet (Fox, 2007). “Companies that invest in all three successfully are heralded on lists such as the Corporate Citizenship list and the Most Admired Companies list, and vie to get accepted onto the Dow Jones Sustainability World Index (DJSWI)” (Fox, 2003, p. 45). Since CSR allows for many different operationalizations, for the purpose of this study, it took on the definition of contributing to sustainable development.

Corporations must be aware of how its business affects the marketplace, the environment, the workplace and the community. Businesses that disregard the importance of CSR initiatives can severely damage their corporate reputations and the impact can be devastating (WBCSD, 1999). For example, unwanted outcomes include consumer boycotts, loss of employee and community support, extra spending to correct past mistakes, litigation, legislation, regulation and negative publicity (Lamb & McKee, 2006). These unwanted outcomes oftentimes can result in crises, “which threatens the corporate image” (Dean, 2004, p. 192). Although proponents of CSR have argued that socially responsible business practices consistently benefits the bottom line, critics have claimed that CSR is just “‘a cloak’ to mask self-interest” (Business the Beneficent, 2006, ¶6). With so much debate surrounding CSR, it is oftentimes difficult to make a case supporting either side. Jonker and Marberg (2007) assert the following:

The dialogue surrounding corporate social responsibility and the role that corporations ought to play in society persists as the world focuses more and more on its dwindling natural resources, changing climate, poverty, lack of social cohesion, corporate scandals and other compelling issues that connect organizations to their constituencies and the environment. (p. 108)

With CSR on the top of the public policy agenda, there has been a shift in what society expects from businesses today. Organizations are being forced to behave in a way society finds
acceptable (WBCSD, 1999). More responsibility is being placed on companies “to alleviate negative consequences of its actions—such as pollution, risky products, discrimination, economic hardship, or a dangerous workplace” (Lamb & McKee, 2006, p. 34). The CSR agenda has shifted from that of philanthropic giving to creating initiatives aimed at improving human rights, employee rights, the environment and community involvement (Barber, 2001). We have moved from away from an era where businesses were considered socially responsible by solely writing checks for specific causes, to an era where businesses now have legal and social obligations to the societies in which they operate. “Corporate social responsibility now includes everything from charitable donations, to voluntary expenditures on environmental protection, to paying Third World workers First World wages” (Business the Beneficent, 2006, ¶3).

One of the keys to success for any corporation is building and maintaining positive relationships within the community. Although the CSR movement offers ways for companies to reduce negative externalities that result from decisions they make, it can also offer ways for companies to produce positive externalities such as increases in education, health outcomes and community development (Hamilton, 2003). Across industries, there are numerous corporations that have engaged in various socially responsible activities. Many companies boast about these initiatives, however, it is the media that plays a big role in maintaining or shifting corporate reputations. The bottom line is that a corporation cannot expect to win the will of its publics if it does not do something for them in return.

Social responsibility is extremely valuable to a corporation when it comes to building and maintaining relationships, building and maintaining an image or reputation, managing risk and hiring and retaining capable employees. CSR issues can range from human rights, employee rights and disaster relief to environmental protection, supplier relations and community
involvement. Thinking about CSR, it is important for businesses to pay attention not only to profits, but also to its reputation. In order to create a good reputation or uphold an existing one, corporations must be able to address societal needs and generate media attention about the good it is doing. But can being socially responsible help organizations avert crisis situations and/or recover quicker from such situations?

Disaster relief, or as it is more often called, crisis communication, is the focus of this study, as it may play an enormous role in reputation management. Crisis situations are defined as “a combination of assessments of the crisis type and modifiers (assessments of performance history and crisis severity)” (Coombs, 2006, p. 183). In terms of this study, corporate crisis took on the meaning of “an unexpected, nonroutine event that creates uncertainty and threatens an organization’s priority goals” (Dean, 2004, p. 192). Crisis management is of extreme value to an organization, and it is the public relations practitioner’s role to manage an organization in a time of crisis. Research has shown that, in general, a practitioner’s job during a crisis is easier when an organization is socially responsible and that pre-crisis CSR has profound implications for crisis-stricken organizations (Ulmer, 2001).

The goal of this study was to conduct a comparative content analysis between Exxon and BP with respect to how favorably and quickly they can recover from an organizational crisis. Generally, research has shown the better reputation an organization has prior to a crisis, the more sympathetic the media are toward the company in terms of coverage (Simokos & Kurzbard, 1994; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Ulmer, 2001; Klein & Dawar, 2004). Ultimately, this enables the company exhibiting CSR to gain community activist support from the favorable projections of the media, thus resolving the crisis more expediently. The press has often been described as the fourth estate to the government. It is no surprise then, that social responsibility theory states that
the press acts as a watchdog and advocate for public interest (Baran & Davis, 2003). Since the media plays a large role in creating public discourse, the research analyzed newspaper articles covering each company’s crisis to see how the media portrayed each organization in its time of crisis.
Chapter 2
Literature Review

History and Theories of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Over thirty years ago, Votaw (1972) wrote the following:

Corporate social responsibility means something, but not always the same thing to everybody. To some it conveys the idea of legal responsibility or liability, to others, it means socially responsible behavior in the ethical sense; to still others, the meaning transmitted is that of “responsible for” in a casual mode; many simply equate it with a charitable contribution; some take it to mean socially conscious; many of those who embrace it more fervently see it as a mere synonym for legitimacy in the context of belonging or being proper or valid; few will see a sort of fiduciary duty imposing higher standards of behavior on business men than on citizens at large. (p. 25)

While “CSR appears to be widely recognized and accepted… it is still more of an idea, a vague concept, in the discourse stage being debated by academia, business and government in different arenas and using various vocabularies” (Jonker & Marberg, 2007, p. 108). Although CSR may mean different things to different people, Fiona Harvey, environmental correspondent for the Financial Times, said the following:

CSR is a buzzword at the moment. Every company wants to talk about it but many do not talk about it very well. My attention is only grabbed by concrete examples. Many businesses think that merely complying with environmental regulations is CSR, when they are only doing what they must by law. (PRWeek UK, 2005, p. 21)

Additionally, Zoellick (2007), President of the World Bank, stated the following about the varying definitions of CSR:

[They] influence the dialogue between governments, private sector and civil society, and this may carry different implications among various parties regarding the legitimacy, obligations and impact of corporate social responsibility standards. For example, one has to be careful in understanding and defining the term “CSR” because CSR is sometimes mistakenly equated with either corporate philanthropy or simple compliance with law. (p.1)

Although there are widely differing definitions of social responsibility, there are basic tenets of a corporation’s duty to the society or community it serves. Federal legislation, judicial rulings and even the press of public opinion have all helped to form a consensus of what a
corporation’s social obligations are. According to Cutlip et al. (2006), those social obligations include the following:

Provide a stable source of employment, with a visible commitment to diversity in hiring, promoting, and compensating workers at all levels; operate profitably and provide a reasonable return on investment to its shareholders; establish and meet strategic objectives that provide for long-term growth and competitiveness; voluntarily comply with—or exceed—government regulations regarding health, safety, and the environment; set aside a reasonable amount of yearly revenue for philanthropic purposes; maintain comparable operating standards in every country where the company does business; participate actively in public policy processes affecting the company, its industry, and other stakeholders who are part of the “public interest.” (pp. 390-391)

In addition to the above mentioned aspects of CSR, organizations must show transparency at all times, be accountable for its actions, build partnerships and help society develop the capacity to help themselves.

The United Nations’ Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) has also formulated general principles of CSR such as contributing to development, exceeding legal requirements, enhancing social protection and strengthening employment opportunities for groups with specific needs, sharing skills and knowledge with local businesses and employees, and taking into consideration groups other than shareholders, such as employees, managers, suppliers, customers, competitors and local communities and governments (United Nations, 1998). More specifically, the CSD pointed out that “a firm is generally considered socially responsible when it seeks to reduce social disintegration or when it contributes to social cohesion” (United Nations, 1998, ¶5). Having general principles such as these is a start, but the difficulty lies in identifying what exactly serves the public interest while at the same time meets shareholder demands or government obligations (Cutlip et al., 2006).

With so much talk about CSR, it is first necessary to understand the history of CSR and how it got to be considered such an important part of our capitalistic system. Literature shows that CSR has been around since the 18th century when business owners showed their duty to
society by giving to charity (Steiner & Steiner, 2003). Another popular view is that the obligations firms face today are a result of the Period of Protests and Empowerment (1965-1985), (Cutlip et al., 2006). This period is classified as “student and activist protests against environmental pollution, racial and gender discrimination, concentration of special interest wealth and power, the Vietnam war, governmental abuse of the public trust, and consequently, and increasing recognition of social responsibility and more responsive organizations” (Cutlip et al., 2006, p. 95). Still others believe that businesses did not begin paying attention to its ‘social consciousness’ until the mid-1940s, and only shortly thereafter was there scholarly interest in the subject (Pratt, 2003).

The use of the term CSR first appeared regularly in the press in the 1970s, “with stories focusing on consumer advocate Ralph Nadar, pollution, and shareholder actions surrounding CSR debates” (Hamilton, 2003, p. 5). However, CSR is said to have its roots in the writings of U.S. Steel founder Andrew Carnegie. In his writings, Carnegie articulated two principles that he thought were fundamental for capitalism to work: charity and stewardship (Freeman & Liedtka, 1991). As corporations grew in both magnitude and power, society put more pressure on these corporations to put human rights issues first (Steiner & Steiner, 2003). As concerns about large corporations and their power came to the forefront in the early 20th century, the broad principles of charity and stewardship helped to shape thinking about CSR (Freeman & Liedtka, 1991). The principle of charity requires more fortunate members of society to assist those less fortunate members, and the principle of stewardship requires businesses and wealthy people to see themselves as caretakers of resources and of their property (Asongu, 2007). By the 20th century, CSR was practiced more widely in the United States than anywhere else in the world (Steiner & Steiner, 2003).
Smith (1994) identified specific milestones that contributed to the evolution of CSR. Among them was the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, which according to Kotler and Lee (2005), did the following:

…brought into serious question the philanthropy of the 1970s and 1980s, where corporations tended to support social issues least associated with their line of business, give to a variety of social causes, and turn over management of their giving to separate foundations. (p. 7)

Kotler and Lee (2005) asserted that when Exxon needed environmental expertise and support, management had no such people to turn to because relationships with this group had never been nurtured, nonetheless established. Now into the 21st century, the trend in CSR is moving toward making “long-term commitments to specific social issues and initiatives, providing more than cash contributions, sourcing funds from business units as well as philanthropic budgets, forming strategic alliances, and doing all of this in a way that also advances business goals” (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 7). Furthermore, the trend in CSR is moving toward making a stronger obligation to protect and enhance global society (Steiner & Steiner, 2003). Consequently, CSR has long been seen by academics and managers alike as the missing link in capitalism (Freeman & Liedtka, 1991).

Newell and Frynas (2007) contested that CSR “emerged among leading firms and business schools as a public relations tool, a way to deflect criticism, engage critics and potentially capitalise on emerging business opportunities associated with doing, and being seen to be doing, good” (p. 670). Today, the use of CSR has changed to reflect our changing society and economy. At present, corporate strategies are “aligned with the pressing need to tackle poverty and social exclusion across the majority world” (Newell & Frynas, 2007, p. 670). Although there isn’t complete agreement on what the concept of CSR fully entails, “issues such
as environmental damage, improper treatment of workers, and faulty production that inconveniences or endangers customers are highlighted in the media” (Asongu, 2007, p. 12).

The concept of CSR includes the following components: economics, legal, ethics and corporate philanthropy (Hall, 2006). The field of CSR is comprised of many different theories and approaches. In order to understand what they are, as well as the implications, it is necessary to classify them into the following four groups: (1) instrumental theories, in which it is assumed that the corporation is an instrument for wealth creation and that this is its sole social responsibility; (2) political theories, where the social power of the corporation is emphasized, specifically in its relationship with society and its responsibility in the political arena associated with power; (3) integrative theories, which argues that businesses depend on society for its growth and continuity and even for the existence of the business itself; and (4) ethical theories, based on the notion that firms should accept social responsibility as an ethical obligation above any other consideration (Garriga & Melé, 2004). In other words, instrumental theories focus on achieving economic objectives through various social activities, while political theories assert that the social responsibility of a business arises from the amount of social power they have (Garriga & Melé, 2004). In addition, integrative theories basically focus on the integration of social demands, while ethical theories focus on doing the right thing in order to achieve a good society (Garriga & Melé, 2004).

From their study, Garriga and Melé (2004) concluded the following:

Most of the current CSR theories are focused on four main aspects: (1) meeting objectives that produce long-term benefits, (2) using business power in a responsible way, (3) integrating social demands and (4) contributing to a good society by doing what is ethically correct. (p. 65)

Although what is considered ethical will depend on the accepted norms of a particular group, organization, culture, etc., it is important to have a broad sense of what it means to be
ethical. Ethics is the branch of philosophy that deals with the “values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions” (Dictionary, 2008, ¶4). Although most classical theories of ethics such as utilitarianism and deontology use different approaches, it is essential to keep in mind that they are all value-driven. Therefore, taking that into account, what a corporation considers ethical can change based on things such as corporate philosophy, goals, objectives and/or strategy.

Although many theories about CSR exist, Wood (1991) argued that only advances toward a theory of CSR have been made (Pratt, 2003). Social responsibility practices can be identified by looking at four traditional arguments made for CSR: “moral (or ethical), reputation (or brand image), license to operate (or legal), and sustainability” (Asongu, 2007, p. 5). Although these categories are not absolute, they do “capture the essence of most mainstream CSR practices and seem to be most relevant for public relations practice” (David et al., 2005, p. 294). Some believe that corporations should be focused on the economic concept of supply and demand and that the government should act as a protector, creating regulations that safeguard citizens, society and the environment (Asongu, 2007). For example, Friedman (1962) insisted “that in a democratic society, government was the only legitimate vehicle for addressing social concerns” (Asongu, 2007, p. 13). Others believe that businesses have a moral duty to contribute to sustainable development, which “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet its own needs” (Esler, 2007, p. 4).

A company’s level of CSR will depend on its size, level of diversification, research and development, advertising, government sales, consumer income labor market conditions and stage in the industry life cycle (McWilliams, 2001). From these hypotheses, McWilliams (2001) was
able to conclude that there is an ideal level of CSR, which managers can determine via
cost-benefit analysis, and that there is a neutral relationship between CSR and financial
performance. Based on her study, McWilliams (2001) found that a firm perspective theory
(Jensen, 1988) to CSR is based on the assumption that managers usually attempt to maximize
profits. Based on this perspective, CSR can be viewed as a form of investment for a corporation.
However, critics have argued that “there’s little if any empirical evidence… that the market can
reliably deliver both short-term financial returns and long-term social benefits” (Business the
Beneficent, 2006, ¶8). In addition, it can be argued that social responsibility works for some
companies and not for others (Business the Beneficent, 2006). “The market niche for relatively
responsible firms may be limited. And a responsible firm’s success isn’t guaranteed to last.
Even some celebrated exemplars, such as Ben and Jerry’s and Body Shop International, have run
into financial difficulties lately” (Business the Beneficent, 2006, ¶9).

Nonetheless, CSR should be part of a company’s daily business. To be a socially
responsible company, business practices must go beyond the bottom-line and extend to the
community and society at large. Many corporations have sustainability objectives requiring that
all activities have an overall positive impact on people and the planet. IKEA, for example, is one
of those companies. IKEA incorporates social as well as environmental goals into its strategic
planning. Barner (2007) made this connection:

Geographically, IKEA focuses on where it can make a difference. We obviously can’t
save 250 million children from exploitation, but changing the lives of 80,000 children in,
say, Uttar Pradesh is still a big accomplishment. To help us in these tasks, we’ve
partnered with NGOs such as Save the Children and UNICEF as well as the WWF. (p.
60)

Being a furniture supplier that uses a large amount of wood, IKEA also focuses a great
deal on sustainable forestry (Barner, 2007). Although IKEA is able to keep prices low and meet
CSR goals, the director of corporate communications said that the “biggest problem in
embedding CSR has been communicating to our people what we’re doing” (Barner, 2007, p. 60). It is clear that CSR stories are a great way to communicate to stakeholders what companies are doing, but companies must be able to relate these stories to various media outlets in some sort of meaningful way.

Although the media can extol and condemn an organization for its CSR efforts or lack thereof, there is also no policing agent or regulatory agency that can monitor and punish corporations that act in a socially irresponsible manner. While organizations such as the United Nations, CorpWatch and the International Chamber of Commerce have developed things such as corporate citizenship initiatives, guiding principles and development goals for CSR, the fact remains that they are not regulatory instruments and instead rely on voluntary compliance. Furthermore, it is difficult to quantify and measure the progress a corporation makes on CSR issues. As Jay Whitehead, Publisher of CRO Magazine, pointed out, “comparing peer companies makes for a better gauge of performance” (Campbell, 2008, ¶9). For instance, looking at citizenship efforts of companies in the chemical, energy, financial, media and utilities industries, CRO Magazine compared different companies’ “environmental, social, governance and financial performance, and measures their track records against industry peers” (Campbell, 2008, ¶2).

Since CSR efforts vary from industry to industry, and journalists have had a difficult time of understanding the motivations and impacts of CSR, comparing peer companies may provide the media with certain guidelines when making comparative ratings, as well as allow them how to cover the topic more accurately and on a larger scale. It seems that the more global media attention that has been given to CSR, the more corporations have begun to realize how important it is in reputation management, averting and/or mitigating crises, and ultimately, to its success as a business.
Role of Media in Portraying CSR Efforts and Crisis Situations

Although the history of CSR may be as old as the history of business, it is in recent years that reporters covering CSR stories across the globe have tended to focus their attention on community, health and environmental issues (Hamilton, 2003). Hamilton’s (2003) study found that there was persistent media coverage of CSR in the 1980s and 1990s, reflecting the notion that CSR “became part of the expected costs of doing business” (p. 5). Furthermore, media coverage of CSR increased noticeably in 2000, rose again in 2001, and persisted to grow in 2002 (Hamilton, 2003). From this data, it is evident that concept of CSR is still evolving and has been gaining media attention over the last 30 or so years.

In a study conducted by Canela and Vivarta (2006), 54 newspaper articles between October 2003 and September 2004 were analyzed to determine how CSR was portrayed in the media and what type of oversight the media exercises over corporations that apply CSR initiatives. The study found that 60% of the texts included discussions that were not focused on issues related to CSR and that 40% had a clear goal of addressing the issue (Canela & Vivarta, 2006). It is interesting to note, however, that most of the stories analyzed contained terms associated with CSR instead of actual reflections on the issue (Canela & Vivarta, 2006). The study concluded that 23.2% of the stories focused on only one or several events regarding CSR, 24.5% of the stories offered a deeper analysis of the issue, and the rest of the articles mentioned the expression social responsibility and its equivalents (Canela & Vivarta, 2006).

Therefore, the analysis of the coverage in this study pointed out that the vague use of the expression ‘social responsibility’ and its equivalents were far more widespread than were in-depth reflections of the issue (Canela & Vivarta, 2006). “In other words, the sample indicated that newspapers publish strictly factual stories (events), and, when more in-depth coverage is sought, the articles offer a narrow line of thinking” (Canela & Vivarta, 2006, p. 101). Again,
perhaps the reason for this was that most journalists lacked knowledge concerning the complexity of CSR, or maybe they did not consider it important enough an issue to cover in-depth. This study concluded that the media had a superficial understanding of CSR, that when in-depth coverage was provided it lacked a critical analysis and/or pluralistic view of the subject and that the concept was often confused with social action (Canela & Vivarta, 2006). This points not only to the need for improved coverage, but also for journalists and media outlets to gain a greater mastery of CSR. Canela and Vivarta’s (2006) study clearly indicated that the “press has yet to assume the role of CSR regulator” and that “CSR has been incorporated on the agenda of public sphere discussions in a mostly neutral light” (pp. 104-105). It is obvious that journalists have a great deal to learn about CSR and its value to capitalistic societies.

Just as CSR efforts vary from industry to industry, CSR coverage varies from media outlet to media outlet. Hamilton’s (2003) study found that the business press focused more on financial aspects of CSR while general interest papers focused more on CSR using entertainment frames such as scandals, crises, activists and ethical issues. Furthermore, he found that CSR discussion on the Internet focused more on issues such as boycotts, human rights and corporate codes and that broadcast outlets did not even cover CSR (Hamilton, 2003). Perhaps this is because “broadcast news is heavily focused on entertaining stories of interest to wide audiences, criteria that CSR stories fail to meet” (Hamilton, 2003, p. 8). Hamilton (2003) offered an effective way to increase the quantity and quality of CSR coverage: lowering the costs of coverage. He also added that the following things can also help reduce the costs of CSR coverage and attract journalists: make a company’s actions more visible, highlight the human interest aspects of a CSR project, develop universally accepted CSR definitions and standards, and provide
Just as it may be optimistic to think that the media draws attention to positive CSR efforts, it may be just as cynical to think that it draws attention to crisis situations. However, as Raboy and Dagenais (1994) argued, the media defines, represents and engages in crisis situations. The authors argued that the media plays a role in defining crises and also structures them as public issues (Raboy & Dagenais, 1994). Furthermore, they claimed that “crises do not exist in the world. They exist in discourse” (Raboy & Dagenais, 1994, ¶6). Since the media creates this discourse, then it can be said that they both socially construct and reflect crisis situations. Evans (2007) further supported the claim that crises are socially constructed through media discourse by stating that whether an organization is involved in a political, social or economic crisis, the crisis itself is often manmade.

Pearson and Clair (1998) emphasized how influential the media have become in framing their perspective of a crisis, pointing out that they have a predisposition to reinforce existing public attitudes. The “media can also affect the way issues are framed through the choices of journalists who cover a story, and those who may be chosen as sources” (Kosicki & Pan, 1996, as cited in Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 283). In other words, depending on which sources are included in media coverage, messages will be framed in a way that reflects the underlying communication message from the respective source. Therefore, by using information subsidies and positioning themselves as an accurate, reliable and readily available source, public relations practitioners have a higher chance of getting their messages to the media (Zoch & Molleda, 2006). Although information subsidies “increase the likelihood that the information will be consumed by the journalists and used in media content” (Turk, 1986, p. 3, as cited in Zoch &
Molleda, 2006, p. 285), Burns’ (1998) study found that just because it is sent to media outlets does not mean that it will be opened or used. The findings of his study suggest that the most important aspect of an information subsidy is the source, that is, who or what organization sent it, rather than the content of the subsidy itself (Burns, 1998). This suggests that being credible and having a solid reputation may impact whether or not an organization’s information subsidy is used by the media. Furthermore, “an understanding of media needs also helps a source to get information published or to get air play” (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 290).

In the case of media framing, it is important to note that it “takes place in discourse and concerns how an idea is justified, legitimized and talked about” (Jonker & Marberg, 2007, p. 116). Specifically, Pearson and Clair (1998) asserted that “organizations generally held in public favor before a crisis will be allowed more latitude regarding their crisis management efforts; those generally disfavored before the crisis will be judged with closer scrutiny” (p. 73). Both in terms of a crisis and as a business in general, the media have the power of framing an organization as socially responsible or irresponsible, therefore influencing publicly held beliefs and attitudes of that organization. In addition, publicly held attitudes about a company have a propensity to impact the media’s perceptions, and ultimately, media coverage (Pearson & Clair, 1998). Based on this, it is not implausible to presume that good CSR tends to bias media’s perceptions of an organization facing a crisis in a positive way. Although the media plays a large role in bringing crisis situations to the limelight, they cannot always be blamed. Organizations that create crises must be held accountable. It may be possible that being a socially responsible company may be helpful in crisis management.

Media coverage of CSR on a global level varies depending on the country. A study done by Echo Research in 2001 revealed that while CSR is a hot topic in some countries, the same
may not be true in other countries (Scott, 2003). The study reported that coverage of CSR in print media in the United Kingdom rose 131% in 2001 compared to 2000, and coverage of CSR in the United States fell by 40% over the same period (Scott, 2003). The study also showed that in that same time period Germany saw an 8% increase in media coverage and France’s media coverage of CSR rose 125% (Scott, 2003). The report attributed “the lack of interest in CSR in Germany to the country’s existing regulatory controls” (Scott, 2003, p. 9). Scott (2003) went on to say that “despite the drop in the level of coverage of CSR in the U.S., the report claims that the existing coverage was more favorable than in the past” (p. 9).

Since getting positive media coverage on CSR efforts can be difficult, many corporations voluntarily publish social responsibility reports and make them available to the public. The problem with self-reporting is that “editors may simply suspect that corporate ethics is an oxymoron and be reluctant to trust company claims about CSR” (Hamilton, 2003, p. 5). Additionally, company-controlled communications are not as credible or influential as media publicity is (Dean, 2004). Not all publicity is good, however. Negative publicity can damage an organization’s reputation, and it can particularly be harmful when trying to mitigate a crisis. Unfortunately though, since the media have a preference for reporting negative news, companies have a better chance of getting bad press rather than positive press (Dean, 2004).

Since the media essentially creates public discourse, and discourse itself constructs and reflects crisis situations, the argument that media can have a great amount of control over how organizations are portrayed in these situations is valid. In fact, Raboy and Dagenais (1994) asserted that “deciding which social/political changes are labeled as ‘crises’ and structuring their representation in the public sphere has become ‘one of the essential functions of mass media’” (¶1). For instance, Dean (2004) argued that the media influenced public perception of Johnson
Johnson’s Tylenol tampering case during and after the crisis. He asserted that “media coverage made it clear that Johnson & Johnson had no control over this post manufacture product tampering, suppressing any Could counterfactuals” (Dean, 2004, p. 196). Perhaps this is why Johnson & Johnson’s sterling reputation was enough to get them through the crisis quickly and unscathed. The company’s positive CSR and good reputation allowed the media to portray it as responsible business that had no control over the crisis.

Ulmer and Sellnow (2000) pointed to three important issues that arise in a corporate crisis: the crisis threatens the organization’s social legitimacy, evidence will be investigated to determine the cause of the crisis and someone/something will be blamed. It is important to note that “questions of evidence are often so complex that typical consumers are dependent on the media to interpret the findings of the investigation for them so that their meaning may be comprehended” (Dean, 2004, p. 193). This further shows how reliant consumers are on the media to be able to come to their own conclusions and opinions about people, places or things. Dean (2004) asserted that “each of these three issues suggests that corporate communication at the time of crisis assumes strategic importance” (p. 194). Although this may be true, corporate communication and action before a crisis may be just as important, or perhaps even more.

Dean’s (2004) study was the first one of its kind to examine the following three factors, which may affect one’s reaction to bad press, together: a company’s response to the crisis event, the company’s reputation for CSR before the crisis and the company’s responsibility for the actual crisis. The study pointed out that literature has already substantiated the first two factors as being important in a time of crisis, and that the third factor has a potential effect on corporate image and reputation (Dean, 2004). The study exposed students from an introductory marking course at Southeastern University to three different scenarios involving a company’s corporate
reputation, response to a crisis and responsibility for a crisis (Dean, 2004). Dean’s (2004) study concluded that responsibility for a crisis situation had the greatest impact on an organization’s reputation, but that a good reputation for social responsibility “may be a double-edged sword” (p. 208).

In other words, although a good reputation may generate goodwill for the company in times of crisis, it may also punish them for inappropriate responses more so than a company with a bad reputation for social responsibility (Dean, 2004). This is most likely because consumers have higher expectations for socially responsible companies. The study also pointed out that “loyal customers are believed to have a greater motivation to actively evaluate negative information, generating counterarguments to negative publicity, and rejecting information that runs counter to their positive opinion of the company” (Dean, 2004, p. 209). Therefore, it is beneficial for an organization to engage in CSR so that customers become as loyal as possible, leading to a greater support system in times of crisis.

Whether or not the media chooses to cover corporations that verbalize its CSR efforts, “public trust or distrust of business is fueled by an accumulation of media reports about responsible, or more often these days, irresponsible corporate behavior” (Valentino, 2007, ¶16). When CSR has an impact on society, whether it is positive or it causes a crisis, it can be argued that the media have a duty to society to report on that impact. However, as Hamilton (2003) found, there are likely markets for CSR stories, but there is low quantity and quality of CSR reporting. Perhaps this is because the topic of CSR, beyond charitable donations, is new to journalists. Whether because they do not yet realize the importance of CSR, or because the concept is relatively new, it seems that journalists have only a superficial understanding of CSR. What makes it even more difficult is that many CSR efforts are aimed at long-term effects, and
“journalists writing about the impact of CSR will find it difficult to assess the impact of company actions” (Hamilton, 2003, p. 5). On the other hand, journalists may find it relatively easy to assess the impact of company actions if it results in a crisis situation. Only until CSR and crisis management are looked at under the same microscope will businesses and media realize how one can impact the other.

**Crisis Communication and Management**

Research on crisis management has examined crises in terms of stages such as crisis planning, crisis decision making and communication strategies post-crisis (Ulmer, 2001). However, one key factor is missing from crisis management analysis: CSR. That is, how socially responsible the organization is in general and how it contributes to sustainable development. “The impact of organizational crises has never been stronger: measureable damage from incidents seems to be greater than in the past, whether quantified as the extent of ecological destruction or the breadth of product contamination impact” (Pearson & Clair, 1998, p. 73). It is precisely for this reason that CSR is so important and should be included in crisis management analysis. This factor can play a large role in damage control and reputation management in general, but particularly when crises arise. Built around protecting an organization’s reputation during a crisis, Situational Crisis Communication theory (SCCT) “identifies a set of crisis response strategies and recommends which strategy(ies) would be most effective in particular crisis situations” (Coombs, 2006, p. 175).

In SCCT, crisis situations are evaluated in two steps: identify the type of crisis involved and evaluate the modifiers (Coombs, 2006). SCCT has two types of modifiers, or “variables that can alter attributions generated by the crisis type” (Coombs, 2006, p. 182). The first modifier, performance history, refers to the organization’s past crisis and social responsibility record, and the second modifier, crisis severity, refers to how much damage the crisis caused (Coombs,
Although these recommendations are not guaranteed to work with every situation, research has shown that “a negative performance history intensifies attributions of crisis responsibility, whereas a positive performance history has no significant effect on attributions of crisis responsibility” (Coombs, 2006, p. 182). It may be true that being socially responsible may not affect a company during a crisis; however, it may also be true that not being a socially responsible company can cause irrevocable damage during a crisis. Therefore, we must break away from the current organizational crisis management research by focusing on relationships developed pre-crisis as well as pre-crisis action and communication, instead of solely emphasizing post-crisis action and communication.

Keeping in line with this, Stakeholder theory (ST) states that organizations must realize the importance of all stakeholders, not just stockholders, in order to be successful, since any group can have a negative impact on the organization if they feel neglected, especially in a time of crisis (Ulmer, 2001). This theory becomes vital particularly in crisis situations since citizens can make or break an organization’s reputation and/or success. In order to establish and maintain positive reputations, companies must be socially responsible and do good at all times, not just in times of crisis. Carole Cone, chairman and founder of Cone, said it best when she said that “good is the new black. It’s a staple in your wardrobe. It’s not going to go away” (PRWeek US, 2007, p. 2). Heath (1997) emphasized how important it is to have strong, mutually beneficial relationships with all stakeholders before a crisis, and that pre-crisis communication should focus on “an appropriate sense of corporate responsibility” (p. 290). He went on to say that “standards of corporate responsibility needed to meet key publics’ expectations” should be implemented before a crisis (Heath, 1997, p. 293). Although having strong stakeholder relationships before a crisis may not help an organization avoid a crisis situation, it can help them in resolving the crisis
(Ulmer, 2001). Besides the fact that “stakeholders have a vested interest in the success of the organization and may represent a network of support during crises,” CSR can generate “reservoirs of good will, alliances, and shared understanding” (Ulmer, 2001, ¶7).

**Public Relations Practitioner’s Role in CSR and Crisis Situations**

Public relations practitioners must always act in the interest of both the organization and its publics. Therefore, emphasizing the importance of social responsibility to the dominant coalition is crucial to fulfilling practitioner duties. In one way, practitioners are serving the public by minimizing social and environmental risks and contributing to sustainable development. In another way, they are serving the organization by building trust and mutually beneficial relationships between them and their publics, which will ultimately be useful and advantageous in times of crisis. The mutual-gains approach offers six guidelines for dealing more effectively with an angry public, such as “acknowledge the concerns of the other side, accept responsibility, act in a trustworthy fashion at all times, and focus on building long-term relationships” (Susskind & Field, 1996, pp. 37-38). The last two guidelines mentioned are particularly important because they can be looked at as social responsibility efforts. CSR prior to a crisis, in this case acting trustworthy and building relationships, can help an organization mitigate fault, repair a damaged relationship, and demonstrate commitment to society both during and after a crisis (Fuchs-Burnett, 2002). During a crisis, it is important for practitioners to handle the situation in a socially responsible manner. This includes being early with information, being first with information, being accurate about facts, being persistent with facts and being consistent (Coombs, 1999).

While critics of CSR have argued that it is just talk, it does not contribute to a businesses’ bottom line and that CSR efforts are just in the self-interest of the organization, proponents have argued that socially responsible companies have altruistic intentions and will face fewer business
risks than companies that are not socially responsible (Business the Beneficent, 2006). Some critics have even gone as far as calling CSR corporate public relations or regulation-dodging (Burton, 2007). Although many believe that CSR is being used to avoid negative publicity and government regulations, others believe that it is being used as a strategic tool in protecting human rights and the environment (Burton, 2007). “While it is arguable whether or not CSR practices actually add to the company’s long-term gain, it is clear that it does generate goodwill” (Asongu, 2007, p. 6).

Goodwill, a result of CSR practices, is imperative to the survival of an organization in a time of crisis, particularly since “corporations must meet the demands placed on them by society in order to survive in this hostile business environment” (Fuchs-Burnett, 2002, p. 34). Creating goodwill for an organization can sometimes be challenging, especially when the organization is being criticized for things such as damaging the environment, trampling human rights or not supporting social causes. Pava and Krausz’s (1997) study evaluated the legitimacy of corporate projects for institutionalizing social responsibility. They concluded that social responsibility projects are ideal in four distinct cases, one being when an organization is directly responsible for causing some kind of harm (Pava & Krausz, 1997). Since this is usually the case with businesses, it seems obvious that social responsibility projects are ideal for all organizations. Organizations “have been found to engage in socially responsible behaviors not only to fulfill external obligations such as regulatory compliance and stakeholder demands, but also due to enlightened-self-interest considerations such as increased competitiveness and improved stock market performance” (Klein & Dawar, 2004, p. 203).

In a study conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 2007 Corporate Social Responsibility: A Pilot Study, human resources (HR) professionals were
surveyed in seven different countries to determine whether their companies executed some type of corporate social responsibility practice (Smith, 2007). The study found the following:

About 80 percent of HR professionals in those countries [Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Mexico, United States] said their organizations participated in practices that could be considered socially responsible and that ranged from donating to local charities to monitoring global fair labor standards. (Smith, 2007, p. 30)

The most commonly reported CSR practices were charitable donations and fundraising, followed by employee volunteering (Smith, 2007). The report also said that many professionals believed that engaging in CSR programs can have a positive impact on enhancing an organization’s public image (Smith, 2007). However, as Smith (2007) pointed out, “there is no standard for measuring the success of an organization’s CSR efforts, making companies partially dependent on how well the organization communicates its CSR practices to its stakeholders, the local community and society at large” (p. 30). Although conventional financial measurement and historic performance have been used as ways to measure CSR efforts, these approaches only scratch the surface. In its CSR report, the WBCSD introduced new approaches to managing, measuring, monitoring and assessing CSR such as good practice networks, internal and external surveys, benchmarking things such as past performance and industry standards, accreditation processes, social screening services and rating systems, site-specific assessments and analytical frameworks (WBCSD, 1999). Since there is no CSR standard, the effective communication of CSR activities is key to being considered a socially responsible company and enhancing reputation, which may ultimately help in averting or mitigating a crisis.

For companies to be considered socially responsible, they must do more than demonstrate good values; they must contribute to sustainable development. Sustainable development is “a three-legged stool for profits, people and the planet where without one leg the rest fail” (Fox, 2007, p. 44). Fox (2007) argued that although the profits aspect of sustainable development can
lead people to be cynical about CSR efforts, “a company cannot pursue sustainable
environmental and social initiatives without being sustainable economically” (p. 44).
Furthermore, Fox (2007) argued that the business case for CSR must be made in order for
corporations to take it seriously. According to Lipman (2006), corporations need to stop viewing
social responsibility activities as disconnected from the overall business strategy. “Instead,
companies should be trying to identify the ways in which social issues intersect with their
businesses, and figure out responses that are beneficial to both society and the corporation”
(Lipman, 2006, ¶5). In fact, a new study conducted by Cone, called the Cause Evolution Survey,
found that 90% of consumers believe that the nature of a company’s CSR programs should be in
line with its own business practices (PRWeek US, 2007).

Although practitioners may face some challenges when establishing and/or maintaining
some sort of level or CSR, Kotler and Lee (2005) offered four suggestions: choose a social cause
that supports business goals; select an initiative to address the issue or issues that will give
visibility to the company; without looking hypocritical, develop and implement program plans
that do enough good for the cause to justify the expense, and have an exit strategy; and
continuously evaluate and measure outcomes of both marketing activities and financial
investments.

To make the business case and tie the whole package together, CSR efforts and initiatives
need to be integrated within the corporate philosophy and other key functions of the company.
Public relations practitioners have realized that if a company’s CSR strategies are going to
succeed, then the whole business must understand CSR, not just one department (Czerny, 2004).
The WBCSD (1999) pointed out the following:
A company acting responsibly will have an integrated approach to CSR across a variety of functional areas, including the financial, environmental and social dimensions. The social responsibility issue must not be marginalized, but should be part of an overall management and business strategy recognized and promoted at board level. (p. 22)

In 2004, the CSR Academy, sponsored by the Department of Trade and Industry, began providing education, training and development for managers of both private and public organizations (Czerny, 2004). This training is focused on helping managers incorporate CSR activities into their core business strategies (Czerny, 2004). When CSR activities are incorporated into the core of business strategies, there is often an increase in the level of job satisfaction because employees feel part of a team, often resulting in an increase in production (Lamb & McKee, 2005). A report by The Work Foundation and The Virtuous Circle found “organizations that integrated CSR activities into the heart of their business strategy could outperform other companies by up to 40% in profitability and productivity” (Czerny, 2004, p. 7). When it comes to dealing with a crisis, it is clear that by incorporating CSR into the core business strategy, practitioners can make their jobs a little easier.

The traditional role of public relations practitioners, press agentry or media relations, was to communicate an organization’s messages to the media. Although this role is not the only one practitioners play today, it is just as important as it has ever been. In addition to the framing done by the media, Zoch and Molleda (2006) stated the following:

…public relations practitioners who act as sources, whether or not they are public information officers or policy actors, also contribute to the framing of a story presented to the media. They do this by highlighting or withholding specific information about a subject or issue from those covering the story. (p. 283)

Using framing, public relations practitioners package an issue or message in a certain way for the media so that they then take that packaged information and use it in news stories (Zoch & Molleda, 2006). Taking this into account, media frames are sometimes pre-developed frames from public relations practitioners. In other words, “when media outlets are provided a carefully
framed message, perhaps even arranged into an organized media package to help facilitate their
newsgathering, the benefits to a practitioner’s organization increase geometrically” (Zoch &

Just as public relations practitioners can frame events and messages to the media, they can
also help build, or set the media agenda. At the core of agenda-setting theory is the idea that
salience is transferred from the media agenda to the public agenda (Carroll & McCombs, 2003).
“In essence, public relations practitioners contribute to the agenda-building process by providing
information subsidies to journalists via news releases, media advisories, press conferences,
interviews and so forth” (Kiousis & Wu, 2008, p. 59). In other words, public relations
practitioners help set the media agenda by passing on information to the media in a certain way.

In framing and setting the agenda, public relations practitioners do so by using
information subsidies. Information subsidies, or prepackaged information, are created by public
relations practitioners “to promote their organizations’ viewpoints on issues, and to communicate
aspects of interest within those issues, to their internal and external publics” (Zoch & Molleda,
2006, p. 284). In other words, information subsidies are used “to publicize organizational
actions and operations that could have an impact on their publics or could add to the formation of
positive organizational images in the minds of their publics” (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 284).
While information subsidies allow the process of news gathering to be cost-efficient for the
media, it allows an organization to influence the public in a way that is considered credible
(Carroll & McCombs, 2003). Specifically, information subsidies include “story suggestions,
news releases, remarks by spokespersons, pseudo-events, satellite feeds, technical reports, and
company websites” (Carroll & McCombs, 2003, p. 42). By using information subsidies as a tool
to inform the media of an organization’s CSR efforts, public relations practitioners frame key
messages so that “the salience of elements on the news agenda influences their salience on the public agenda” (Carroll & McCombs, 2003, p. 37).

**Link between CSR and Crises**

It is obvious that a good reputation can be an important factor in dealing successfully with a crisis situation (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994). Specifically, “it has been shown that the crisis effect on a well-known company with a positive image may be minimal” (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994, p. 31). Research has also shown that negative effects of a crisis may be alleviated by the press when it reports that a company in crisis is acting socially responsible in an effort to mitigate damage (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994). When handling a crisis, there are appropriate actions of CSR that organizations must take to ensure that its reputation is not severely tarnished. These actions include being first, being accurate, being comprehensive, being consistent, being accessible, being transparent, being committed in the long haul, being credible, being accountable and responsible, building partnerships, meeting stakeholder expectations and taking corrective action(s) (Lundgren & McMakin, 2004). However, companies must always act in socially responsible ways, not just during or after a crisis arises. Therefore, it is worthwhile to know whether or not the negative effects of a crisis can be alleviated by the press if it reports that a company in crisis is always socially responsible.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to note the findings of Siomkos and Kurzbard’s (1994) product-harm crisis study. In this study, 384 people between the ages of 18 and 40 were randomly selected from the general population and randomly assigned to 16 treatment groups in order to examine company’s reputation, external effects (regulatory agencies, the press and interest groups) and company’s response to a crisis in terms of the consumer’s perception of danger, future purchasing intention and whether or not the company responded appropriately (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994). Specifically looking at company
reputation and external effects during the crisis, their study found that these two factors “significantly affect consumers’ perceptions of the degree of danger associated with the harmful product” (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994, pp. 35-36). In other words, consumers viewed product defects as less dangerous when the company involved in the crisis had a strong reputation and when external parties’ (i.e. the press) reactions to company responses were positive (Siomkos & Kurzbard, 1994). It is clear from this study that the media can play a powerful role in influencing consumers’ opinions about an organization, and that a company’s reputation prior to a crisis can play just as big a role, or sometimes an even more powerful role than the media. When the media covers an organization in a favorable light, chances are that consumers will view them in the same light. By the same token, when an organization is socially responsible and as a result has a strong reputation, the media and society, through a domino effect, will also view the organization in a favorable light.

Previous marketing research has shown that CSR affects unrelated product evaluations, but Klein and Dawar’s (2004) study examined the halo effect that CSR beliefs have on attributions made about a product-harm crisis. This CSR halo effect, they asserted, “may influence consumer judgments in nonroutine settings” such as unpredictable crisis situations (Klein & Dawar, 2004, p. 204). For their study, 150 people that were intercepted in a mall completed a questionnaire that used a seven-point Likert scale to examine three conditions: positive CSR, negative CSR and a control condition, where no CSR information was provided (Klein & Dawar, 2004). The researchers hypothesized that “for firms that enjoy positive prior CSR, the trigger event for the product-harm crisis will be judged as more external, less stable and less controllable, relative to firms that do not enjoy positive CSR” (Klein & Dawar, 2004, p. 207). After supporting the above hypothesis, Klein and Dawar (2004) found that “CSR associations
have a strong and direct impact on consumers’ attributions, which in turn translate into blame for the incident that consequently influences brand evaluations and purchase intentions” (p. 215).

But, the study also found that this impact is evident only for consumers who report that CSR is important in making their decisions (Klein & Dawar, 2004). The study concluded that “CSR is like an insurance policy that is there when you need it,” because although it may not be enough to avert a crisis, it can be “instrumental in reducing the risk of damage to brand evaluations in the event of calamity” (Klein & Dawar, 2004, p. 215). It is clear from this study that negative CSR is a power liability and has a greater impact on an organization’s reputation in a crisis situation than positive CSR. This study is proof of how CSR can save organizations money, resources, time, reputation deterioration and a big headache in times of crisis.

Shrivastava (1995) examined how not accepting broad corporate social responsibilities can impact an organization in a crisis situation. Using the example of Union Carbide’s response to the Bhopal crisis, his study concluded that an organization that does not fulfill its responsibilities in terms of ecocentric management, sustainable development, and crisis prevention and management will not be able to survive without doing so (Shrivastava, 1995). In the case of Union Carbide, the author pointed out that not accepting broad corporate social responsibilities has resulted in constant debilitation of the company in the 10 years since the accident (Shrivastava, 1995). In general, Shrivastava (1995) asserted that corporations must learn that being socially responsible is not only ethical, but of significance to long-term survival.

Specifically, Shrivastava (1995) stated the following:

It is in the self-interest of companies to broadly conceptualize their responsibilities on safety, health, and environmental issues and fulfill them vigorously. By doing so, they are likely to act with more caution and more concern for human and environmental impacts of their activities. This caution and concern can reduce their crisis chances. (p. 225)
Corporate social responsibility and profitability go hand-in-hand. Similarly, CSR and crisis prevention/mitigation go hand-in-hand. But being socially responsible in the way businesses make profits is just the beginning of CSR. Businesses “must go one step further: they should proactively strive to improve the working and living standards of their employees, contribute to communities in which they operate and preserve and protect the environment” (Jonker & Marberg, 2007, p. 108). Companies that invest in education, the environment and health and human services are reaping the benefits not only financially, but also by enhancing their reputations and in turn, averting or minimizing crises when they arise.

For the purpose of this study, good CSR took on the meaning of contributing to sustainable development. Bad CSR took on the meaning of not demonstrating an active commitment to sustainable development via social and environmental programs. Based on the aforementioned literature, this study addressed the following research questions:

**RQ1**: Do companies that are considered socially responsible receive more favorable media coverage during a crisis situation?

**RQ2**: Does the tone of media coverage in a crisis change over time?

**RQ3**: What is the CSR portrayal of an organization in crisis through emotive language?

**RQ4**: What frames do the media use in coverage of an organization in crisis?

**RQ5**: What sources do the media use predominantly during a crisis?
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Method

A fully accurate measure of CSR impacts in crisis situations would have required the analysis of all media coverage of an organization in a crisis. As this would have been impractical within the scope of this thesis, the perspective of one media channel—newspaper articles—served as a proxy for the full spectrum of relevant media channels. Newspaper articles from The New York Times were specifically chosen for this study because of its status as an elite newspaper and its reputation for comprehensive coverage. Such an elite newspaper can be very influential in the framing and agenda-setting of other papers (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Therefore, it is important to look at framing and agenda-setting together, since framing is central to second-level agenda-setting (McCombs, 1997).

Comparative content analysis was deemed the most appropriate research method for this investigation. Comparative analysis integrates key aspects of content analysis, although no specific coding is utilized, and looks for recurring patterns in order to evaluate trends. Because this was a comparative content analysis, research questions were selected in an attempt to establish the level of importance of being seen as socially responsible, while at the same time trying to determine if such status affects media coverage of a crisis, and inevitably, the recovery process and time. Recovery process and time were operationalized in terms of change in media coverage tone over the crisis cycle.

Content analysis is a systematic and objective research technique used for studying the content of communication (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Specifically, quantitative content analysis was employed because it “increases the degree of precision of one’s conclusions and permits a more accurate description of covariance between elements” (Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989,
Content analysis includes at least the following seven steps: formulate the hypothesis or research questions, select the sample, define the categories, outline the coding process and train coders, implement the coding process, determine the reliability and validity of the study and analyze the results (Kaid & Wadsworth, 1989). Keeping in line with content analysis, Zipf’s law assumes that words and phrases used most often in communication reflect important concerns in every communication (Zipf, 2008). “Therefore, quantitative content analysis starts with word frequencies, space measurements (column centimeters/inches in the case of newspapers), time counts (for radio and television time) and keyword frequencies” (Zipf, 2008, ¶14).

The research was based on framing theory and agenda-setting theory. Framing theory asserts that the way in which a message is presented to a person will influence the choices he or she makes. Central to second-level agenda-setting is agenda-framing, which “is the selection of a restricted number of thematically related attributes on the media agenda when a particular object is discussed” (McCombs, 1997, p. 6). The process of framing is the way in which “a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy” (Nelson et al., 1997, p. 221). There are two types of frames: natural and social (Goffman, 1974). Whereas natural frames occur organically, social frames are created deliberately by public relations practitioners and the media to present information in a certain way (Goffman, 1974). Therefore, “framing is critical to the construction of social reality—the way people view the world” (Zoch & Molleda, 2006, p. 282). Since both the media and public relations practitioners engage in framing events and messages, framing can be seen as a “strategy of constructing and processing news discourse or as a characteristic of the discourse itself” (Pan & Kosicki, 1993, p. 57). Additionally, sources chosen by the media can provide further detail to a framework already in place (Kosicki & Pan, 1996, as cited in Zoch & Molleda, 2006).
using framing theory, the media and public relations practitioners are able to “help arouse, sustain, and renew certain affective and emotional experiences related to an issue” (Kosicki & Pan, 1996, p. 150). In some cases, public relations efforts may be so effective that it can create public discourse about topics that would otherwise be ignored.

Agenda-setting theory suggests that the media sets the agenda by forcing attention to certain issues. “They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in mass media should think about, know about, have feelings about” (Lang & Lang, 1966, as cited in McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177). In other words, instead of telling readers what to think, the media tells them what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). “In classic agenda-setting research, the core dimension of public opinion monitored has been perceived public salience, but the attitudinal consequences of the process have also been highlighted” (Kiousis & Wu, 2008, p. 62). Since media coverage can influence what the public thinks about, it is plausible that the media influences the salience of attitudes as well (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In other words, media salience of an issue increases the salience of that issue in public opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

Kiousis et al. (2007) analyzed the impact of public relations and news media on corporate reputation and financial performance and found that “corporations would benefit from stressing corporate vision and leadership and social responsibility in their information subsidies targeted toward mass media outlets” (p. 161). This study found that this can ultimately lead to a more effective use of media relations in managing a reputation. The study proved that object salience in public relations messages may lead to increased salience in news coverage. Although the media have traditionally played the role of setting the news agenda, other groups such as public relations practitioners and interest groups are increasingly participating in agenda-setting (Zoch
& Molleda, 2006). This is important to the field of public relations because practitioners “can plan strategies and create messages targeting specific media outlets to emphasize those traits that are likely to result in a better image” (Kiousis et al., 2007, p. 162). Regardless of who is trying to set the agenda, the facts remain that this theory is useful when attempting to shape reality in a way that influences public perceptions and attitudes.

Events and Pre-Crisis Status

Irresponsible Corporation: Exxon

On March 24, 1989, carrying 1.26 million barrels or 53 million gallons of oil on it, the Exxon Valdez oil tanker entered the Prince William Sound on Alaska’s southern coast on its way to California and hit the Bligh Reef, spilling an estimated 11 million gallons of crude oil. At the time of the collision, the third mate, who was not certified to take the tanker into those waters, was steering the vessel. The spillage spread for 12 square miles in a region that was habitat for salmon, sea otters, seals, sea birds and the great white shark. Reports later claimed that the collision occurred because the Captain and many of the crew had been drinking alcohol onboard. Exxon was criticized for its employees’ reckless behavior, doing too little too late, not communicating openly and effectively, lack of leadership and their indifference to environmental destruction, to name a few. The legal implications of this crisis are still lingering.

A direct descendant of Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company, ExxonMobil was formed in 1999 by the merger of Exxon and Mobil. Today, using “Taking on the world’s toughest energy” as its tagline, ExxonMobil is the world’s largest company by both revenue and market capitalization. ExxonMobil markets products worldwide under the brands of Exxon, Mobil and Esso. Prior to the 1989 Valdez oil spill, Exxon had been criticized for its business practices and environmental record. In fact, before ExxonMobil came into being, the U.S. Supreme Court convicted the Standard Oil Company of running a monopoly in 1911 and ordered that it be
separated into 34 unrelated companies. Besides being aggressively accused of contributing to global warming by the burning of fossil fuels, Exxon has also been attacked for donating millions of dollars to advocacy organizations which dispute the impact of global warming. These seemingly unethical practices are not the only ones on Exxon’s docket of activities. There has also been a presumed connection between OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) and Exxon. Three-quarters of OPEC members are based in the Middle East. Keeping in mind that Exxon has always had a large percentage of its oil-producing territories in the Middle East as well, it is clear that Exxon had a close relationship to OPEC. When OPEC placed a six-month embargo on oil shipments to the U.S. in 1973 with the motive to boost sales and profits at all the major oil companies that operate in the U.S., Exxon came under suspicion. The company’s sales and profits hit record highs during the oil crisis of the 1970s, and as a result, faced new criticisms regarding the way it conducted business.

Exxon, in response to the Valdez incident, states on its Web site that “the Valdez oil spill was a tragic accident that Exxon deeply regrets. The company took immediate responsibility for the spill, cleaned it up and voluntarily compensated those who claimed direct damages” (ExxonMobil, 2008, ¶32). However, almost 25 years later, Exxon’s case in the Supreme Court is still pending litigation. Among the directly affected by the spill were thousands of fisherman, businesses and nearby communities. Although the company claims to have compensated those impacted by the spill, it is still appealing a $2.5 billion USD punitive ruling and has not yet paid any damages besides cleanup costs (Sherman, 2007). Despite criticism of its business practices, environmental record and human rights violations, Exxon claims to have contributed to educational, health, welfare and community service programs. Prior to the 1989 Valdez oil spill, Exxon opened an environmental health research site in New Jersey in 1980 to “further assure the
safety of Exxon operations and products” (ExxonMobil, 2008, ¶29). Furthermore, it developed a computerized communications network that uses desktop workstations to exchange information and data internationally in 1988. Exxon stated that “among other advantages, the new world-wide network facilitates quick responses to unusual developments, such as a refinery operating problem or an abrupt oil price change” (Exxon Annual Report, 1988, p. 11). In addition to communication improvements, Exxon also claimed to have made several product improvements for consumers in 1988, such as the 93-octane Exxon Supreme gasoline for high-performance automobile engines and the Thermal DeNOx for reducing harmful nitrogen oxides in combustion gases (Exxon Annual Report, 1988). In 1988 alone, Exxon contributed to sustainable development by donating $49 million to non-profit organizations, including $35 million in the U.S. (Exxon Annual Report, 1988). Of those donations, 59% were for educational institutions and programs while 24% were directed to health, welfare and community service programs (Exxon Annual Report, 1988). Exxon established the Education Foundation in 1988 to improve math learning and teaching in elementary grades. It gave Math Specialist Planning Grants to 50 school districts across the U.S. to assist the districts in planning for the utilization of math specialists (Exxon Annual Report, 1988). As part of its matching gift program, educational gifts made by Exxon employees to the United Negro Fund, the American Indian College or the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities were matched three-to-one by the Foundation (Exxon Annual Report, 1988). Exxon also donated $50,000 to the Institute on Black Chemical Abuse in Minnesota to help develop a national technical assistance, training and information center, as well as $20,000 to the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute to help contribute to a better understanding of how the environment affects human health (Exxon
Furthermore, Exxon rigorously recruited minorities and women through summer jobs, co-op assignments and scholarships (Exxon Annual Report, 1988).

**Responsible Corporation: BP**

On March 2, 2006, a BP field worker smelled crude oil while driving through the Prudhoe Bay in the tundra of Alaska’s North Slope. Five days earlier, about 267,000 gallons of oil leaked from a quarter-inch hole corroded in a 30-year-old BP pipeline. The dime-sized hole resulted in nearly 5,000 barrels of crude oil spilt out across an area of two-acres, home to thousands of migratory birds, caribou and other creatures. This spill led to the discovery that six miles of the pipeline was badly corroded, and as a result, much of the Prudhoe Bay was shut down. Reports later claimed that a leak detection alarm went off four times during the week before the spill was discovered, but that BP had interpreted the leak detections as false alarms. BP was criticized for using old pipes, failing to ensure the proper safety and maintenance of its pipes, cost-cutting and failure to invest in the plant. BP publicly accepted both legal and financial responsibility for the spill.

In 1998, British Petroleum merged with Amoco, becoming BP, using the tagline “Beyond Petroleum.” Before the oil leak in the Prudhoe Bay, BP had been criticized for an explosion at one of its Texas City refineries that killed 15 people and injured over 100 in 2005. In 2003 and 2004, government regulators accused BP of artificially driving up the prices of propane. Despite these incidents and criticisms, BP has been praised for being one of the first major energy companies to not only acknowledge the global threat posed by climate change, but to vow to share in the responsibility of doing something about it. In addition, in 2005, BP voluntarily set aside $700 million in compensation for the Texas City incident. BP prides itself in the areas of health and safety, continuous improvement, human capability, and environmentally sound operations.
Keeping in mind what constitutes CSR, BP has contributed to sustainable development in the following ways: BP runs programs through training courses, international assignments, mentoring, team development days, workshops, seminars and online learning to increase the number of local leaders and employees in its operations; it is part of European Union Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS) and claims to reduce waste and emissions and use natural resources responsibly; it contributes to energy policy education and spent $50.2 million in promoting education in the areas of energy and the environment, business leadership skills and basic education in developing countries where it operates large projects; it launched BP Ultimate in 2003 to carry “fuel that delivers reductions in emissions such as carbon monoxide and nitrogen oxide compared with standard fuel” (Sutherland, 2006, p. 20); it created BP Alternative Energy in 2005 “to generate and market cleaner, low-carbon power from solar, wind, hydrogen and natural gas sources” (Sutherland, 2006, p. 20); BP supports university projects that investigate transportation and energy issues in growing urban areas and funds research centers, such as Oxford University in the United Kingdom; BP contributed $95.5 million in community programs in 2005; it invested $9.6 million in support of enterprise development and supports micro-finance systems in countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, Colombia and Vietnam; BP has installed solar panels at its service stations, brought solar power to villages in the Philippines, Algeria and Sri Lanka, helped bring hydrogen-fueled buses to London, and introduced new, cleaner types of motor fuel. BP also has water management guidelines, waste management programs, and requirements for environmental impact assessments (EIAs), environmental management systems and environmental programs. Since 2000, BP has supported more than 200 initiatives related to biodiversity, spanning research, education and conservation. Furthermore, BP supports and uses
voluntary principles on security and human rights and has developed partnerships with environmental groups such as the National Wildlife Federation.

**Data Collection**

The researcher employed an online search of the database LexisNexis Academic. Using the search term ExxonMobil Valdez with the following parameters, major U.S. and world newspaper publications within the last 20 years, a total of 919 newspaper articles emerged. Of those, 212 were from *The New York Times*, 146 from *The Washington Post* and 52 from *USA Today*. Using the search terms BP oil spill and BP Prudhoe Bay with the following parameters, major U.S. and world newspaper publications within the last two years, a total of 826 and 792 newspaper articles were retrieved, respectively. Correspondingly, 32 and 18 of those articles were from *The New York Times*, 15 and 17 were from *The Washington Post* and 11 and 9 were from *USA Today*.

**Sampling Units**

National print coverage of both events was studied. National coverage involved a content analysis of the Exxon Valdez oil spill as well as the BP Prudhoe Bay oil leak coverage of *The New York Times, The Washington Post* and *USA Today*. Founded in 1851, *The New York Times* is the largest metropolitan newspaper in the United States with a daily circulation of more than 1.1 million and is distributed internationally on a daily basis. With its famous motto always printed in the upper left-hand corner of the front page, “All the News That’s Fit to Print,” the *The New York Times* is owned by The New York Times Company and is published in New York City. Its daily editions have three major sections: news, opinion and features. *The Washington Post*, founded in 1877, is the largest newspaper in Washington, D.C. and has a daily circulation of almost 700,000. Owned by the Washington Post Company, *The Washington Post* is regarded among the leading daily American newspapers and has distinguished itself through its reporting
on several different aspects of the U.S. government. Owned by the Gannett Company, *USA Today* was founded in 1982 and has the widest circulation of any U.S. newspaper (more than 2.2 million copies every weekday). With its motto “Your News, When You Want It” printed on the front page, *USA Today*’s daily editions have four major sections: news, money, sports and life. The three selected newspapers for this study are highly regarded among media outlets and therefore served to represent national elite media content.

**Sampling Frame**

A total of 211 hard news articles were analyzed for this study. With respect to national coverage of Exxon Valdez, the analysis examined 166 articles from March 25, 1989 until March 25, 1990. This period covered the day after the oil spill until a year after the impact. Of the 410 articles initially retrieved from the three newspapers, 230 were taken out because they did not fit within the specified time frame. One article was removed because it was a duplicate, and another article was removed because it was irrelevant. Twelve additional articles that were editorials were removed since the researcher intended to obtain true news story counts. Since the BP crisis was recent, accurate data was only available through the end of 2007. Because of the limits on available, accurate information, this comparison began with the day after each incident and concluded with information one year after the impact. Therefore, in order to make an accurate comparison, coverage of both events used the aforementioned time frame.

With respect to national coverage of BP’s Prudhoe Bay, the analysis examined 45 articles from March 3, 2006 until March 3, 2007. This period covered the day after the oil leak from a corroded pipeline was found until a year after the impact. Of the 102 articles initially retrieved, 20 were taken out because they did not fit within the specified time frame. Twenty-five articles were removed because they were duplicates, and another article was removed because it was irrelevant. Five articles were taken out because they were short blurbs found in the summary.
section of the newspaper with no more than a sentence about the crisis. Six additional articles
that were editorials were removed since the researcher intended to obtain true news story counts.
News coverage of BP was limited in comparison to Exxon because of the selected time frame
and publications. Therefore, being relatively recent, BP’s coverage was not as extensive as that
of Exxon’s.

**Analyzed Dimensions**

National coverage of both events was subjected to identical content analyses. The study
was not limited to an examination of crisis media coverage; it attempted to provide broad data on
media coverage. The stories were analyzed on several dimensions that were quantitative in
nature. These dimensions included the date of the article, location of the article in the
newspaper, the number of words in each article, frequency of emotive language, news frames,
news sources, first source cited, first source quotes and the overall tone of each article. These
classifications served the purpose of illustrating how much time and emphasis the media placed
on each crisis. Because it was highly unlikely that an article would unequivocally state that an
organization is or is not socially responsible, analyzing emotive language served the purpose of
cueing into contextual clues that are important in categorizing a company as being socially
responsible or not. News frames were classified as primary if the article referred to health,
human interest, economic, environmental, legal, attribution of responsibility or denial, or
secondary if the article referred to any other news frames. News sources were classified as
corporate if the article attributed a quote or paraphrased a quote from an organizational member;
government if the article attributed a quote or paraphrased a quote from a government official;
other if the article attributed a quote or paraphrased a quote from anyone other than an
organizational member or government official; corporate and government if the article attributed
a quote or paraphrased a quote from both an organizational member and a government official;
corporate and other if the article attributed a quote or paraphrased a quote from both an organizational member and another source; government and other if the article attributed a quote or paraphrased a quote from both a government official and another source; all of the above; or none of the above. Additionally, the first source cited in each article as well as the first source quoted in each article was classified as corporate, government, other or none.

Most central to this discussion, the negative, neutral or positive media coverage of each company in a crisis was also noted. In all of the articles, any reference to the following specific behaviors was listed: 1) apology, 2) accountability, 3) responsibility, 4) clean-up, 5) assistance, 6) goodwill, 7) blame, 8) denial, 9) appeal, 10) refusal, 11) irresponsibility, 12) contradiction, etc. An individual story could discuss none, one, or more of these issues. In addition, the nature of the discussion was analyzed. Each reference to the above behavior was classified as being anti-CSR if it reinforced the company’s lack of CSR efforts prior to and during the crisis, pro-CSR if it reinforced the company’s CSR efforts prior to and during the crisis, mixed-CSR if it equally reinforced both the company’s CSR efforts and lack thereof or neutral.

Coding was conducted by a team of two graduate students. The students met several times with each other and with the principle investigator to discuss the coding process and to familiarize themselves with both the code book and code sheet. Using Holsti’s formula, a subsample of the material, 10%, was used to measure inter-coder reliability. The degree of agreement ranged from a high of 100% for the most easily quantified material, such as date of the article, location of the article in the newspaper, word count, news sources, first source cited and first source quoted to a low of 90.48% for the frequency of emotive language, news frames and overall article tone. After a discussion of the items that the coders did not agree on, the
coding process and content categories were refined. In addition, all of the coding of the content was in a form that allowed for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis Strategy

Diction 5.0 and human researchers were used to code and analyze the data for the study. Diction is a windows-based text analysis program that scientifically codes text-based messages using an unlimited number of words. The program analyzes these messages and produces numeric files that can later be easily used for statistical analysis. Diction is a flexible text analysis program that allows the researcher to dictate which words are of primary importance to the research. In this way, the researcher was able to create a custom dictionary to restrict the program’s analysis to only words chosen by the researcher. After the data was complied into reports, it was uploaded to SPSS. SPSS 15.0 was used to conduct the statistical analysis comparing the media coverage of each crisis.
CHAPTER 4
RESULTS

This analysis was based on the content of 211 newspaper articles, which represented coverage over the course of one year of both Exxon and BP during an organizational crisis. The majority of the Exxon articles, specifically 75.9% (n=166), were located on pages other than the first of any section of the newspaper, while 60% (n=45) of the BP articles were located on pages other than the first of any section. Slightly less than a quarter (21.08%) (n=166) of the Exxon articles were located on front page of the first section, compared to slightly less than a third (31.11%) (n=45) of the BP articles. Precisely 3.01% (n=166) of the Exxon articles were located on the front page of all other sections, compared to 8.89% (n=45) of the BP articles. Slightly more than two-thirds (66.87%) (n=166) of the Exxon articles had a word count of 601 words or more, compared to 55.56% (n=45) of the BP articles. Nearly one-fifth (19.28%) (n=166) of the Exxon articles had a word count that ranged from 301 to 600 words, compared to 33.33% (n=45) of the BP articles. Finally, 13.86% (n=166) of the Exxon articles had a word count that ranged from zero to 300 words, compared to 11.11% (n=45) of the BP articles.

**RQ1:** Do companies that are considered socially responsible receive more favorable media coverage during a crisis situation?

The results of an independent sample t-test indicated that there is no significant difference in the amount of favorable coverage a socially responsible company receives during a crisis, \( t (209) = -0.95, p = 0.34 \). That is, the average of favorable media coverage for BP \((M = -0.56, SD = 0.725)\) was not significantly different from that of Exxon \((M = -0.45, SD = 0.628)\). Thus the researcher failed to reject the null hypothesis that the means are the same.

Since there was no significant difference between both companies, it cannot be said with confidence that a company that is considered socially responsible receives more favorable media coverage during a crisis. Therefore, RQ1 was not shown to be supported.
RQ2: Does the tone of the media coverage change in a crisis over time?

With respect to both Exxon and BP, and based on the timeline of the articles, there was no identifiable pattern of media coverage changing in either crisis over time (see Figures 4-1 and 4-2). Therefore, in this specific case, the tone of media coverage did not change over time.

RQ3: What is the CSR portrayal of an organization in crisis through emotive language?

The third research question addressed how each organization in crisis was portrayed in terms of CSR through emotive language in each article. A descriptive reporting of means indicated that 41.6% (n=166) of the Exxon articles used emotive language to reflect anti-CSR, while 35.6% (n=45) of the BP articles reflected anti-CSR. Six percent of the Exxon articles reflected neutral-CSR, while none of the BP articles did. In terms of pro-CSR, 44.6% (n=166) of the Exxon articles reflected this, compared to 46.7% (n=45) of the BP articles. Furthermore, 7.8% (n=166) of the Exxon articles reflected mixed-CSR, compared to almost 17.8% (n=45) of the BP articles.

RQ4: What frames do the media use in coverage of an organization in crisis?

The fourth research question addressed the issue of news frames. A descriptive reporting of means indicated that 59.6% (n=166) of the Exxon articles used primary news frames, compared to 82.2% (n=45) of the BP articles. Primary news frames included health, human interest, economic, attribution of responsibility, environmental, legal or denial news frames. Secondary news frames were used in 40.4% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, compared to nearly 17.8% (n=45) of the BP articles. Secondary news frames included any other news frames (blame, fear, disputes, etc.).

RQ5: What sources do the media use predominantly during a crisis?
The fifth research question addressed the issue of news sources. News sources were analyzed in general by investigating which news sources, if any, were included in each article. Additionally, the first source cited and first source quoted were also evaluated. A descriptive reporting of means found that 3% (n=166) of the Exxon articles contained only corporate news sources, while just 8.9% (n=45) of the BP articles contained only corporate news sources. Corporate news sources included both companies’ CEO, spokespersons, employees and the like. Government news sources were used in 9.6% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, compared to 2.2% (n=45) of the BP articles. Government news sources included state governors and mayors, district attorneys, governmental agencies (state and federal), city council members, the U.S. President, etc. “Other” news sources were used in 6.6% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, while none of the BP articles included this source. “Other” news sources included environmental groups with no government affiliation, contractors and suppliers, environmental lawyers, energy and oil industry analysts, economists, trade associations, scientists, wildlife experts, other oil companies, etc. Both corporate and government sources were used in 11.4% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, compared to 28.9% (n=45) of the BP articles. Both corporate and “other” news sources were included in 4.2% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, compared to 11.1% (n=45) of the BP articles. Both government and “other” news sources were used in 24.1% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, compared to 8.9% (n=45) of the BP articles. Precisely 40.4% (n=166) of the Exxon articles included corporate, government and “other” news sources, compared to 37.8% (n=45) of the BP articles. Finally, 0.6% (n=166) of the Exxon articles included no news sources, while 2.2% (n=45) of the BP articles had no news sources cited.

A corporate source was cited first in 16.3% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, while 46.7% (n=45) of the BP articles cited a corporate source first. A government source was cited first in
49.4% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, compared to 35.6% (n=45) of the BP articles. An “other”
source was cited first in 33.7% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, compared to 15.6% (n=45) of the
BP articles. There was no source cited in 0.6% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, while to 2.2%
(n=45) of the BP articles cited no source.

In terms of source quotes, 16.3% (n=166) of the Exxon articles quoted a corporate source
first, while 42.2% (n=45) of the BP articles quoted a corporate source first. Government sources
were quoted first in 49.4% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, compared to 28.9% (n=45) of the BP
articles. An “other” source was quoted first in 28.3% (n=166) of the Exxon articles, compared to
22.2% (n=45) of the BP articles. Finally, 6% (n=166) of the Exxon articles quoted no source
first, compared to 6.7% (n=45) of the BP articles.
Figure 4-1 Tone of Exxon Media Coverage Over Time

Figure 4-2 Tone of BP Media Coverage Over Time
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to analyze media coverage of two oil companies in crisis, looking specifically at how favorably each company was portrayed throughout the crisis, as well as to evaluate news frames and news sources. It is important to note that Zipf's Law states that the frequency of the words that appear in a document reflects the importance of the concepts that those words represent. Going into the study, qualitative text analysis was weighed against quantitative text analysis, and equivocating between the two, it was decided that quantitative text analysis best served the purposes of this project with few limitations. To account for the possibility of cross-category confusion, every effort was made to only include words in each category that were exclusive to that specific category. Despite this modification, it was understood that there was a possibility for cross-category confusion. For example, the category anti-CSR included the term "irresponsible" which is exclusive to that category. On the other hand, the pro-CSR category included words such as “responsible,” which was not exclusive to that category. It was possible that in context, the word “responsible” may have been a component of the phrase "not responsible," which has an anti-CSR connection. This anomaly was understood and seen as unavoidable, as the topic of this paper is corporate social responsibility. Regardless of this anomaly, Zipf's law states that mentioning concept-oriented words such as “responsible” reflects on the importance of the overarching theme of this paper. Additionally, mixed-CSR results were possible due to the anomaly stated above.

The first research question for the study sought to determine whether companies that are considered socially responsible receive more favorable media coverage during a crisis situation. A higher percentage of BP articles had a more positive tone than Exxon articles, but ultimately, it was not a statistically significant difference.
The low amount of positive Exxon articles may be explained by Pearson and Clair’s (1998) assertion that organizations that are generally disfavored and have a negative past performance history do not receive as favorable media coverage because they are under careful evaluation by the media. ST may help shed some light on Exxon’s negative media coverage seeing as they may have not nourished stakeholder relationships prior to the crisis (Coombs, 2006). Over two-thirds of the BP articles had an overall negative tone. This finding, however, did not support the general claim that the better reputation an organization has prior to a crisis, the more sympathetic the media are in terms of coverage (Simokos & Kurzbard, 1994; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Ulmer, 2001; Klein & Dawar, 2004). On the other hand, this finding did support Dean’s (2004) “double-edged sword” idea. This idea states that although a good reputation generates goodwill for the company in times of crisis, it also punishes them for inappropriate responses more so than a company with a bad reputation for social responsibility (Dean, 2004). In other words, it is possible that BP received negative press because consumers may have had higher expectations for the company since it is seen as a more socially responsible corporation with a better reputation than Exxon. As Dean (2004) found, organization’s have a better chance of getting negative press than positive press simply because the media have a preference for reporting negative news. This finding may offer a possible explanation as to why the majority of both Exxon and BP’s articles were negative in tone.

Positive articles for BP appeared almost twice as often as those for Exxon. This could, on the other hand, be explained by the same general claim that is unsupported by BP’s negative articles. As Simokos and Kurzbard (1994) found, negative effects of a crisis may be alleviated by the press when it reports that a company in crisis is acting socially responsible in an effort to mitigate damage. Perhaps BP’s slightly higher positive media coverage may have been due to its
accepting legal and financial responsibility of the crisis. Furthermore, BP’s positive media coverage may be explained by the presence of strong pre-crisis stakeholder relationships. Additionally, the tone of the BP articles became more positive earlier in the crisis than the Exxon articles. A possible explanation for this may be that no blame was laid on any party, therefore resulting in the BP coverage becoming more positive earlier on. It is also possible that media coverage may have reflected publicly held attitudes about BP, impacting media perceptions and ultimately, media coverage of the crisis early on (Pearson & Clair, 1998). It is important to note, however, that in terms of volume, Exxon had more coverage than BP. Although the type of coverage that Exxon and BP received was generally the same, perhaps the BP crisis was not as environmentally or economically significant, hence why the BP coverage was less in volume.

The second research question sought to determine whether the tone of media coverage in a crisis changes over time. A chronological analysis of the articles was used to determine this. Based on the timeline of articles, the tone of media coverage fluctuated, and no identifiable pattern was found in both the case of Exxon or BP. This inconclusiveness could be attributed to a reporter’s personal belief(s) about the companies, which may have been reflected in the articles. Another possibility could be that an article’s tone may reflect current public opinion, which is dynamic and frequently changing. On the other hand, perhaps there was no identifiable pattern because the media was reporting hard news with little or no bias, resulting in a balance of media reporting in this case. Despite these possibilities, the study provided no conclusive evidence that the tone of media coverage in a crisis changes over time.

The next question for the study sought to determine the CSR portrayal of an organization in crisis through emotive language. Key words were coded as pro-CSR, anti-CSR, neutral-CSR and mixed-CSR. The results of the analysis showed that Exxon was portrayed as being a
socially responsible corporation in just under half of the articles, while BP was also portrayed as
being a socially responsible corporation in just under half of the articles. Perhaps this points to
the concept of CSR not having as much influence on organizational media coverage during a
crisis as previously believed. BP, however, had a slightly higher pro-CSR portrayal, which may
have been due to its established CSR programs and initiatives, performance history or
comparatively better reputation. The publics’ perception that BP is socially responsible may
have had an impact on the media portrayal of the crisis being less severe than that of Exxon’s.
Exxon’s early pro-CSR portrayal may have been due to the fact that at the beginning of the
crisis, it seemed that Exxon did make an attempt to rectify its mistake. However, according to
the opinions expressed in the articles, these efforts were half-hearted and led to compulsory
government intervention. The depiction of Exxon as a socially irresponsible corporation was 6% higher than that of BP’s. According to SCCT, the high percentage of Exxon’s anti-CSR
portrayal may have been due to its past performance history, seeing as Exxon Valdez was not the
company’s first major oil spill. Moreover, Exxon’s oil spill had a profound economic and
environmental impact. As SCCT illustrates, a positive performance history has no notable effect
on the severity of a crisis, while a negative performance history increases the severity of a crisis
(Coombs, 2006). Additionally, Exxon refused to take legal responsibility, resulting in 19 years
of ongoing litigation. BP’s anti-CSR portrayal may also have been the result of its CSR efforts
and prior reputation, just as its pro-CSR portrayal was, with the difference being that its CSR
efforts may have reduced the amount of negative CSR coverage.

Exxon had more articles that were neither pro- nor anti-CSR than BP had. This could be
attributed to the federal case that was pending litigation or to journalists stating the facts. This
finding may also be explained by Canela and Vivarta’s (2006) study which found that the media
have a superficial understanding of CSR and that it “has yet to assume the role of CSR regulator” (pp. 104-105). They also found, that the vague use of CSR and its equivalents were far more widespread than were in-depth reflections of the issue (Canela & Vivarta, 2006). Canela and Vivarta’s (2006) finding may be a possible explanation for why BP did not have any neutral-CSR articles. Another possible explanation can be that more people may have cared about the oil spill, resulting in them taking a side.

Finally, the depiction of Exxon as both a socially responsible and socially irresponsible corporation was 10% less than that of BP. Exxon’s mixed-CSR portrayal in the articles was possibly a result of changing public opinion due to the slow process of discovery and fact finding in the federal case. BP’s mixed-CSR portrayal could be attributed to its prior CSR efforts despite the crisis event that it was responsible for. A mixed-CSR portrayal could reflect on the articles’ conceding that BP was the cause of the crisis and could have prevented it, as well as BP’s understanding that it was responsible for the crisis and took every initiative to rectify the situation.

The fourth research question for this study sought to determine which frames the media use in covering an organization in crisis. For both Exxon and BP, the media predominantly used primary news frames, such as health, human interest, the economy and the environment. This finding was in line with Hamilton’s (2003) assertion that journalists covering CSR stories in recent years tend to focus their attention specifically on community, health and environmental issues. Specifically, the environmental frame included information on damage to wildlife and the ecosystem. The economical frame included information on affected industries and businesses and on the impact of oil prices around the country. The human interest frames highlighted community residents who helped in the cleanup efforts, as well as residents whose
livelihood was affected by the oil spills. These frames may reflect the growing notion that CSR has become “part of the expected costs of doing business” (Hamilton, 2003, p. 5). Furthermore, the findings supported Hamilton’s (2003) study which found that general interest newspapers focus more on CSR by using entertainment frames such as scandals, ethical issues and crises.

The final research question for the study sought to determine which sources the media use predominantly during a crisis. The most individually cited source in the Exxon articles was government sources, while the most individually cited source in the BP articles was corporate sources. These findings are in line with the current trend in media coverage to consult primarily government and corporate sources. The media consulted government sources more so than any other individual source to get information about the Exxon crisis. Perhaps this was due to Exxon’s lack of credibility or untrustworthiness regarding information about the oil spill. Maybe government sources were more valuable to the media since there was more government involvement in the cleanup efforts and litigation for Exxon’s spill than BP’s. Or perhaps reporters consulted government sources, as previously stated, since it is the current trend in media coverage. Contrary to Exxon, the media consulted corporate sources more so than any other individual source to get information about the BP crisis. These findings suggest that perhaps the media considered BP a more credible and trustworthy organization than Exxon.

Since the crises occurred almost 20 years apart, it is possible that BP may have had a more effective public relations operation or better trained spokespeople than Exxon. The use of both corporate and government sources together was used more in BP articles than in Exxon articles. This suggests a higher reliance on credible, authoritative sources. A dependence on what was coded as “other” would have included a large number of unreliable sources. Despite indicating that Exxon articles relied on government sources and BP articles relied on corporate sources,
given the specifics of the information, it was impossible to determine what sources the media used predominantly in each case because of the presence of the “other” category. The “other” category encompassed any number of sources ranging from an anonymous source to Joe Schmoe, and because of this variety, the credibility and accountability of each source was undeterminable.

The first source cited in each article was coded in order to determine which source was chosen to guide each article. Almost half of the Exxon articles cited a government source first. As would be expected, since the first source cited in Exxon articles was a government source, nearly half of the Exxon articles quoted a government source first. Direct quotes provided additional support to the first source cited. A likely explanation for this result could be the federal case that was initiated because of Exxon’s oil spill. During the period of time analyzed, the federal case was in its discovery and fact finding phase, of which the result was an influx of information. This information was open to the public and could have been a likely source of interesting information to the media. Additionally, in many instances that Exxon was called upon to comment on the crisis, it declined to make a statement. This may have been a precaution due to the ongoing legal battle, however, staying silent may have hurt its credibility. As Zoch and Molleda (2006) found, depending on which sources are included in media coverage, messages will be framed in a way that reflects the underlying communication message from the respective source. In the case of Exxon, it was clear that government sources were predominantly chosen and that they put the crisis narrative in to place from the beginning.

Almost half of the BP articles cited a corporate source first. In similar form, nearly half of the BP articles quoted a corporate source first. A likely explanation for this result could be BP’s desire to get its information out first. By positioning themselves as an accurate, reliable
and readily available source, BP’s public relations practitioners had a higher chance of getting their messages to the media (Zoch & Molleda, 2006). By providing the media with information subsidies, BP’s public relations practitioners may have played a role in framing the crisis narrative (Zoch & Molleda, 2006). In this way, BP was able to both frame the crisis and set the media agenda. As Burns (1998) found, being credible and having a solid reputation may impact whether or not an organization’s information subsidy is used by the media. From this study, it seems possible that corporate sources from BP may have been used predominantly because of the company’s credibility and reliability or because of its relationship with the media. Having a good relationship with the media is vital since it is a window the organization speaks through to reach its publics. Perhaps BP had a better relationship with the media pre-crisis than Exxon. These pre-established relationships may have been the reason why the media relied heavily on corporate sources. Perhaps this good relationship led the media to believe that BP was credible, legitimate, consistent, accurate, open and honest about the crisis and its part in it. By being open and transparent with its stakeholder groups, BP provided a wealth of information that was easily accessible by the media.

**Implications**

The concept of CSR post dates the Exxon Valdez crisis. Only recently has CSR been incorporated into business goals and strategies. Perhaps Exxon did not recognize the importance of contributing to sustainable development as BP may have recognized almost 20 years later. Either way, BP’s status as a socially responsible corporation played no role in its media coverage during the crisis. Although BP may have been more proactive in its crisis response because it learned from the mistakes of oil companies like Exxon, this was not reflected in this study. Regardless, Exxon’s crisis had a significantly greater environmental and economical impact than BP’s. Exxon also faced a greater amount of litigation than BP. Despite this, there was no
significant difference in the amount of favorable media coverage BP received during its crisis. Perhaps the media have a superficial understanding of CSR just as organizations may have had in the past. Or perhaps there have been changes in journalistic patterns of covering organizations in crises over time. Either way, it is possible that organizational efforts in CSR need to be revised and adjusted. Based on this study, it is possible that the concept of CSR may not have any impact on media coverage of an organization in crisis. Although the media may not fully understand the importance of CSR, public relations practitioners do.

The role of public relations during a crisis is invaluable. One of the guidelines offered by the mutual gains approach says to accept responsibility (Susskind & Field, 1996). Perhaps BP’s public relations practitioners were more influential to top management than were Exxon’s, hence BP’s ability to frame the crisis from a corporate perspective. The media forced attention to the environmental, economic, health, human and legal impact of each crisis. BP, however, played a role in setting the agenda, as evident by the media’s reliance on corporate sources from the organization. BP seized control of the story and got its message out early. In this case, agenda-setting and framing theory can be applied to how an organization communicates its CSR efforts to the media. By framing the narrative early on, BP was able to position itself as a proactive organization. This proactive involvement may have allowed BP to get through the crisis phases quicker and ultimately may have had a greater influence in its recovery. Although it may be difficult to establish and strengthen the narrative, once it is in place, it is very difficult to change, giving the organization the upper hand.

This project found that although the tone of media coverage did not change over time, the tone of BP’s media coverage became positive earlier on. This study also found that there was no significant difference in favorable media coverage between Exxon and BP. As a result, it cannot
be said with confidence that a company that is considered socially responsible receives more favorable media coverage during a crisis. Furthermore, it was found that while the pro-CSR portrayal of both Exxon and BP was relatively the same, Exxon was portrayed as more socially irresponsible than BP. Perhaps this was because CSR was not seen as an important corporate function as it is today. It is also possible that the way both Exxon and BP were run may have contributed to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of handling each crisis. Taking into consideration leadership and business practices, the way each crisis was dealt with may have varied.

Although some organizations only realize the need for public relations practitioners after a crisis, many organizations recognize the importance of the public relations function as it pertains to crisis management and communication. It is possible that BP’s public relations practitioners were able to emphasize the importance of social responsibility to the dominant coalition more effectively than Exxon’s; however, it did not make a difference in the amount of favorable media coverage BP received. Perhaps only after managing a crisis will organizations realize the importance of its public relations function and the need to align CSR activities with the overall business strategy. Nonetheless, based on this study, organizational efforts in CSR may not be as influential as once believed. Although CSR can help an organization achieve its bottom line more effectively and efficiently, perhaps the role CSR plays needs to be revisited and modified in order to fit today’s business strategies and goals.

**Limitations**

Because this was a comparative content analysis of two individual oil companies, this project is limited in its generalizability to other oil companies. Because of oil companies’ pervasiveness in the global economy and environment, the generalizability to other industries is limited. The first limitation of this study stemmed from the lack of equivalent media coverage.
There was considerably less media coverage for the BP crisis than the Exxon crisis. Perhaps this was due to the greater ecological and economical damage that the Exxon crisis caused. Another possible explanation could be attributed to other factors going on in the world at the time of each crisis. Because of the wide scope of articles available in the media, it was impossible, given the time and resources allotted, to conduct a census of all articles. A broader media picture looking at a greater number of newspapers or even including television coverage may have been more effective. The limited time frame of one year was also a drawback of this study. Limiting the time frame to one year did not allow for a balanced amount of articles. The Exxon crisis and BP crisis happened almost 20 years apart, and the public relations landscape has changed since the late 1980s when the Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred. Perhaps the underestimated significance of the public relations function partially contributed to the severity of the Exxon crisis. CSR is a newer concept in the corporate world and has recently emerged as an important part of business activities. Given the lack of development of the idea of CSR during the time frame of the Exxon crisis, it is possible that this may have had an impact on the analysis of media coverage.

Suggestions for Future Research

It is hoped that this thesis will shed some light on the importance of CSR efforts as they pertain to overall organizational goals. However, in this specific circumstance, CSR efforts did not seem to have an impact. Crises potentially have the power to put an organization out of business, and well-executed CSR programs may have the potential to mitigate this effect. However, this conclusion was not supported in this study. Future studies should look at crises that occur within a similar time frame and/or crises that have equal environmental or ecological impact. Perhaps doing a qualitative analysis would add more value to the research because content would be taken in to account rather than counting the frequency of words. The concept of CSR is still evolving, so the manner in which the media covers it will also evolve over time.
As a result, researchers must continue to study the trend of how CSR efforts impact crises and how it is covered by the media and conduct studies over time. This study is by no means meant to an overarching barometer of the relationship between CSR and crises nor the relationship between the media and corporations in crises. However, it is hoped that this research will serve as the beginning of what could potentially be a wide range of research related to the study of social responsibility, crises, corporations and media portrayal, which will continue to expand as the growing and evolving field of CSR does.
APPENDIX A
CODE BOOK

Source: All newspaper articles were retrieved from The New York Times, The Washington Post and USA Today via the database LexisNexis Academic.

Date range: 03/25/1989 – 03/25/1990 (Exxon); 03/03/2006 – 03/03/2007 (BP)

Every article in the sample should receive a unique identification number that consists of the following: EX1-EX166; BP1-BP45. The date and time of each article should be in this format: month/day/year. For example, an article that was published on March 25, 1989 would have the following identifier: 03/25/1989. If more than one article in the sample is published on the same date, the year of publication will be followed by a, b, c and so on in chronological order.

I. Location of Article in Newspaper
Articles are coded for its location in The New York Times, The Washington Post and USA Today as information is available. Location can be determined by information explicitly stated on the article. Location of article in newspaper is coded as prominent (front page of section A), less prominent (front page of all other sections) or obscure (all other pages of other sections).

II. Word Count
Number of words in each article is coded as either short (0-300 words), medium (301-600 words), or long (601 words or more).

III. Frequency of Emotive Language
References to emotive language are coded as reflecting anti-CSR, neutral CSR, pro-CSR or mixed-CSR. Language that portrays the company as not socially responsible (anti-CSR) includes the words blame, denial, appeal, refusal, irresponsibility, mistake, problem, contradiction, damage, crisis, emergency, negative image, unethical, risk, negligible, contamination, violation, dispute, litigation or functional variations of those words as well as similar word choices. Language that does not portray the company as either socially responsible or socially irresponsible is coded as neutral CSR. Language that portrays the company as socially responsible (pro-CSR) includes the words apology, accountability, responsibility, clean-up, positive image, cooperation, assistance, goodwill, transparency, ethical, agreement, public relations, solution, safety or functional variations of those words as well as similar word choices. Language that portrays the company as being both socially responsible and socially irresponsible is coded as mixed-CSR.

IV. News Frames
Each article is coded for its general news frame. News frames are coded as being primary (health, human interest, economic, environmental, legal, attribution of responsibility or denial news frames) or secondary (any other news frames).

V. News Sources
Each article is coded for source attribution. Quotes or paraphrases from sources are coded as corporate (sources from within the organization), government (sources
from within the government), other, corporate & government (sources from within the organization and from within the government), corporate & other (sources from within the organization and other sources), government & other (sources from within the government and other sources), all of the above or none of the above.

VI. First Source Cited
Each article is coded for the first source cited. The first source cited in each article is coded as corporate (sources from within the organization), government (sources from within the government), other or none.

VII. First Source Quoted
Each article is coded for the first source quoted. The first source quoted cited in each article is coded as corporate (sources from within the organization), government (sources from within the government), other or none.

VIII. Overall Article Tone
Each article is coded for its general tone. Tone is coded as being negative (depicting blame, irresponsibility, denial of responsibility, economically motivated actions, human error, neglect, carelessness, regulation, condemnation, incompetence, legal action/litigation, forced action, remorselessness, no intention of doing good or taking corrective action, arrogance, aggressiveness and/or selfishness), neutral (depicting neither obviously positive nor negative associations) or positive (depicting responsibility, concern, remorse, corrective action, praise, honesty, integrity, reliability, sincerity, trustworthiness, carefulness, competence, transparency, voluntary action, social responsibility and/or positive themes such as human service, monetary compensation, people receiving praise, progress, etc.).
### Table B-1. Code Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable name</th>
<th>Variable label</th>
<th>Value labels</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ID</td>
<td>Identification Number</td>
<td>BP1-BP45; EX1-EX166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATELINE</td>
<td>Story Date</td>
<td>mm/dd/yyyy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOCATION</td>
<td>Location of Article in Newspaper</td>
<td>1=Prominent 2=Less Prominent 3=Obscure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COUNT</td>
<td>Word Count</td>
<td>1=Short 2=Medium 3=Long</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| FEL           | Frequency of Emotive Language | -1. Anti-CSR  
- a. Blame 
- b. Denial 
- c. Appeal 
- d. Refusal 
- e. Irresponsibility 
- f. Mistake 
- g. Problem 
- h. Contradiction 
- i. Damage 
- j. Crisis 
- k. Emergency 
- l. Negative Image 
- m. Unethical 
- n. Risk 
- o. Negligible 
- p. Contamination 
- q. Violation 
- r. Dispute 
- s. Litigation  
0. Neutral CSR  
1. Pro-CSR  
- a. Apology 
- b. Accountability 
- c. Responsibility 
- d. Clean-up 
- e. Positive Image 
- f. Assistance 
- g. Goodwill 
- h. Transparency 
- i. Ethical 
- j. Agreement 
- k. Public Relations |
| NF | News Frames | 1. Solution  
m. Safety |
|----|-------------|----------------|
| NS | News Sources | 2. Mixed-CSR  
1=Primary  
1=Secondary |
| FIRSTS | First Source Cited | 1=Corporate  
2=Government  
3=Other  
4=Corporate & Government  
5=Corporate & Other  
6=Government & Other  
7=All of the Above  
8=None of the Above |
| FIRSTQ | First Source Quoted | 1=Corporate  
2=Government  
3=Other  
4=None |
| OAT | Overall Article Tone | -1=Negative  
0=Neutral  
1=Positive |
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jenine Spoliansky grew up in South Florida and attended the University of Florida where she received her Bachelor of Science in public relations in 2006. She continued her education pursuing a Master of Arts in Mass Communication from the University of Florida, specializing in public relations. Upon graduation in May 2008, Jenine hopes to use her degrees to contribute to the enrichment of people’s lives.