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# ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND SENSEMAKING DURING A CASCADING CRISIS: TOKYO DISNEY AND THE 2011 JAPAN EARTHQUAKE/TSUNAMI/NUCLEAR CRISIS

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ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND SENSEMAKING  
DURING A CASCADING CRISIS: TOKYO DISNEY AND THE 2011 JAPAN  
EARTHQUAKE/Tsunami/NUCLEAR CRISIS

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the  
College of Communication  
at the University of Kentucky

By

Holly Ann Roberts

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Shari Veil, Professor of Communication

Lexington, Kentucky

2012

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION, SOCIAL MEDIA, AND SENSEMAKING DURING A CASCADING CRISIS: TOKYO DISNEY AND THE 2011 JAPAN EARTHQUAKE/Tsunami/NUCLEAR CRISIS

This study examines the connection between organizational crisis communication and sensemaking. In particular, the research focuses on messages of instructing, adjusting and reputation management and the use of social media in distributing these messages through and by the Tokyo Disney Resort during the earthquake/tsunami/nuclear crisis that hit Japan in 2011. Case study methods are used to analyze news coverage, Twitter and YouTube videos, informed by personal interviews and documentation related to the crisis and the Tokyo Disney Resort. The analysis found that the Tokyo Disney Resort provided messages of instructing, adjusting and reputation management in order to effectively foster the sensemaking process, which was corroborated by personal communication with cast members. Messages of instruction were delivered regularly through a park-wide speaker system and cast members who also provided instruction to minimize harm. Adjusting information was evident in effectively taking care of guests' physical and psychological needs through provision of food, water, blankets, etc. and by keeping them updated about the status of the outside world. Finally, messages of reputation management were apparent in the Resort's willingness to put people above profit by sacrificing food, products and money to help victims of the disaster.

**KEYWORDS:** Tokyo Disney Resort, crisis communication, organizational communication, sensemaking, social media

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Holly Roberts

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April 27, 2012

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Currently, my crisis binder, which contains all my crisis readings for the semester, proudly displays a quote from Alice in Wonderland: “Well, after this I should think nothing of falling down the stairs.” That quote pretty much sums up my graduate school experience. What a truly magical, trying, wonderful time it has been!

In a long line of people to thank, I will first start with my Daddy. To say he has been supportive would be a drastic understatement. Not only has he kept me from starving on a regular basis, but, just as he has done for the past 27 years, he consistently reminds me that he loves me and that he is proud of me. Sometimes that’s all a girl needs to hear. Aside from pushing for the University of Kentucky from the beginning (don’t deny it, Dad – you bought me a blue laptop before my applications were processed), he was also instrumental in my focus. My interest in studying risk and crisis communication stems from overwhelming paranoia and, while seemingly unjustified, my habits most certainly stem from my Dad’s need to be prepared for well, everything. Thanks for that and for listening to all the mini-crises I have experienced the last two years. Thanks for being such a good Daddy.

Secondly, I’d like to thank my thesis committee. Dr. Veil, Dr. Sellnow, and Dr. Real have all been critical in guiding this research, as well as my course of study. I’d like to offer a special thanks to my thesis chair, Dr. Veil who helped spark my interest in risk and crisis and allowed me to stalk her to the University of Kentucky. You held me accountable at all times and expected nothing short of my best. Thank you so much!

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Disney is often regarded as the happiest place on earth. With seven theme parks in four countries as well as multiple resort locations, cruise lines and travel venues, Disney has expanded its positive, magical image around the world. The Tokyo Disney Resort is the eighth most visited tourist attraction in the world with an estimated 12.9 million visitors per year (Whoyougle.com, 2011). Disney licenses its properties to Oriental Land Co., Ltd. (OLC Group), which owns and operates the Tokyo Disney Resort. The resort includes two parks, Tokyo Disneyland and Tokyo DisneySea, and six hotels with 3,855 rooms. The resort also employs 20,000 people (Tokyo Disney Resort, 2011b). Disney markets their parks as “the place where fantasy becomes real and reality becomes fantastic” (Disneyconventionears.com, 2011, p. para. 1). However, in the face of a very real crisis, like the one experienced on March 11, 2011, Disney must leave the fantasy world in order to ensure the safety of thousands of guests and employees.

On March 11, 2011, Japan was struck by the fifth largest earthquake ever recorded. The side effects of such a quake were undeniably catastrophic, triggering a tsunami and the meltdown of nuclear power plants (Jones, 2011). During this event, the Tokyo Disney Resort had guests in their parks, restaurants and resorts. Amidst such a crisis, the organization is responsible for communicating effectively with their patrons to help them make sense of the situation and ultimately minimize risk and harm.

### **Objectives**

Given Disney’s pristine reputation and their presence as one of the biggest media conglomerates in the world, organizational communication through and by the Tokyo Disney Resort provides an excellent venue in which to study crisis communication. This research

seeks to assess the effectiveness of messages disseminated by the Tokyo Disneyland Resort during the 2011 earthquake/tsunami/nuclear crisis. Particular focus will be directed at assessing messages of instructing, adjusting and reputation management in order to aid in the sensemaking process. To do this, the researcher will conduct a case study with evidence gathered primarily from news coverage, Twitter and YouTube videos.

### **Literature Review**

Given the focus of this research, there are several areas of literature that need to be explained to understand the effectiveness of the Tokyo Disney Resort's response to the crisis in March of 2011. First, an understanding of crises, specifically natural disasters as crises must be established. The type of crisis affects the manner in which the organization should communicate with stakeholders and the sensemaking process of stakeholders. Thus, the literature review next entails a detailed examination of sensemaking and the role of organizational communication in crises. In particular, the role of organizations in establishing the sensemaking process will be discussed. Once sensemaking has been explained, the literature will explain Coombs' (2012) message content of instructing, adjusting and reputation management. Finally, the literature review will inspect the role of social media in today's culture and in crisis communication.

**Crisis and Natural Disasters.** Crisis is defined as a "sense of threat, urgency, and destruction, often on a monumental scale. Crisis suggests an unusual event of overwhelmingly negative significance that carries a high level of risk, harm, and opportunity for further loss" (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2003, p. 4). From an organizational standpoint, "crisis can be viewed as the perception of an event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can impact the organization's performance" (Coombs, 2009, p. 99).

From an organizational perspective, natural disasters are “when an organization is damaged as a result of the weather or ‘acts of God’ such as earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, hurricanes, and bad storms” (Coombs, 2012, p. 73). This type of crisis differs from other crises that may plague an organization like workplace violence, rumors, malevolence, challenges, technical-error accidents, technical-error product harm, human-error accidents, human-error product harm or organizational misdeeds (Coombs, 2012).

However, from a risk standpoint, natural disasters must always be considered a possibility and therefore should be a concern for managers (Coombs, 2012). In fact, Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2011) contend that

although these events are largely unpredictable, some steps can be taken to reduce their impact on an organization. For example, building a nuclear reactor on or near an existing earthquake fault line would be unwise. Similarly, locating an organization in an area that is uncommonly susceptible to floods or tropical storms is indefensible...in short, organizations must take into account possible threats of natural disaster before they invest in their facilities. (p. 11)

Given the likelihood of earthquake occurrences in Japan (Sample, 2011), the Tokyo Disney Resort should have had a plan in place for this type of natural disaster. Earthquakes are unique in that there is little to no warning of this natural disaster whereas a hurricane or storm may be monitored for several days before causing damage. This furthers the sentiment that the Tokyo Disney Resort should have had a plan in place for an earthquake because there would be little to no warning prior to a potentially tragic quake.

Previous work on crisis communication and natural disasters sheds light on the Japan crisis. First, natural disasters can cause great needs and opportunities. As Sellnow, Seeger and Ulmer (2002) explain, “disasters in the form of earthquakes, hurricanes, and forest fires, although natural processes, can have profound effects when combined with established human structures in communities” (p. 273). Obviously, the events that took place in Japan,

while considered a natural disaster, impacted an entire country in a tragic and devastating manner.

Another area of interest emerging from this research is how individuals respond to warnings that are provided. In a study on the Kentucky Ice Storm of 2009, researchers found that “while organizations hope or assume that warnings will be heeded...many people hear warnings yet continue to engage in their current activities” (Coffelt, Smith, Sollitto, & Payne, 2010, p. 29). This creates a huge burden on the media and responsible organizations to engage in providing information in a manner that will encourage self-protective measures. Furthermore, because Japan is no stranger to the tragedy of earthquakes, there is a level of expectation that should result in adequate preparation.

This level of expectation implies that organizations must understand, anticipate and be willing to help stakeholders understand what is happening. Because earthquakes, as natural disasters, contain an element of surprise that differentiates them from other crises, organizations must not only be prepared to communicate quickly and through effective, memorable means, but they must also be prepared to overcome difficulties in the sensemaking process based upon the crisis’ lack of expectancy. Failure to do so could result in loss of control of the situation and the inability to ensure stakeholders cycle through the sensemaking process, which is an ethical responsibility of an organization involved in a crisis.

**Sensemaking and the Role of Organizational Communication in Crisis.** Often, crises with high levels of uncertainty and stress can cause a cosmological episode which occurs

when people suddenly and deeply feel that the universe is no longer a rational, orderly system. What makes such an episode so shattering is that both the sense of

what is occurring and the means to rebuild that sense collapse together. (Weick, 1993, p. 633)

Weick furthers this explanation by stating that a cosmological episode is like “vu jade,” which is the opposite of “déjà vu” in that rather than feeling a sense of experiencing the situation before, individuals are left thinking, “I’ve never been here before, I have no idea where I am and I have no idea who can help me” (Weick, 1993, p. 634). These episodes can, thus, impact an individual’s capability to cycle through the stages of sensemaking. The less adequate the sensemaking process, the more likely the crisis is to intensify (Weick, 1988).

Sensemaking, in simplest of terms, is the process of making sense of a situation (Weick, 1995). In order to explain how individuals effectively accomplish this task, the sensemaking process offers three stages to the development of sensemaking: enactment, selection and retention. The first step is that of enactment, which is where action is taken by saying something, doing something or choosing to notice informational input. Weick (1988) explains that

at the heart of enactment is the idea that cognition lies in the path of the action. Action precedes cognition and focuses cognition. The sensemaking sequence implied in the phrase, ‘How can I know what I think until I see what I say?’ involves the action of talking, which lays down traces that are examined, so that cognitions can be inferred. These inferred cognitions then become preconceptions which partially affect the next episode of talk, which means the next set of traces deposited by talk are affected partially by previous labels and partially by current context. (p. 307)

The first step of enactment is followed by the second step in the process: selection. During this process, a sensible interpretation for received information is chosen. Weick (1979) outlines this process by explaining that

when information reaches the selection process, it is pragmatically conditioned by the interests of the *individual* actor. His [*sic*] interests, and his interests alone, determine the meaning. But when this information is passed along to the selection process, collective rather than individual pragmatics control the establishment of meaning.

This being the case, it is likely that different components of the input will be attended to in different ways...(p. 70)

The third and final step of the process is that of retention, which is where interpretations are used for subsequent sensemaking (Weick, 1979) with the “results of retention feeding back to all three prior processes” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 414). Essentially, “when a plausible story is retained, it tends to become more substantial because it is related to past experience, connected to significant identities and used as a source of guidance for further action and interpretation” (Weick, et al., 2005, p. 414).

While many factors may play a role in an individual’s sensemaking ability, Weick (1995) describes the sensemaking process through seven properties: 1) grounded in identity construction, 2) retrospective, 3) enactive of sensible environments, 4) social, 5) ongoing, 6) focused on and by extracted cues, and 7) driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). In order to develop a better understanding of these properties, each must be explained more thoroughly.

To begin, identity construction can be somewhat complicated in that it begins with a sensemaker. This incorrectly gives more credit to the individual than is due because “no individual ever acts like a single sensemaker” (Weick, 1995, p. 18). Instead, identity construction explains that how we makes sense of an event depends on how we make sense of ourselves (Mills & O’Connell, 2003). This becomes complicated for organizations communicating during a crisis because one may never know the previous experiences of others and how that will impact their sensemaking during an unfortunate event. For example, Mills and O’Connel (2003) found that identification with the role of journalist impacted the way individuals may understand and disseminate crisis coverage by viewing themselves as an information broker, dramatist and worker.



The second element of sensemaking is that it must be retrospective. As the word implies, this means that sensemaking should rely on previous experiences. This position furthers the belief that “people can know what they are doing only after they have done it” (Weick, 1995, p. 24). This can be problematic in that “because the expectation is that the future will look much like the past, new developments and new risks that do not fit existing interpretations may be overlooked or ignored” (Seeger, et al., 2003, p. 18). If an organization has a reputation for not handling crisis well, this past experience can greatly affect perceptions in an emerging crisis. As those affected by the crisis look backward, they may be less likely to trust messages coming from a source deemed to be unethical or unreliable.

The third sensemaking property embraces the concept of enactment. Weick claims that this is crucial for sensemaking because there is no universal environment shared by all participants and that through enactment, we create our own understanding. “Instead, in each case the people are very much a part of their own environments. They act, and in doing so create the materials that become the constraints and opportunities they face” (Weick, 1995, p. 31). This emphasizes the value in immediate instructional messages. By telling the victims of crises how to act or the type of action to take, the organization can effectively foster the sensemaking process.

The fourth property, social, addresses the potential misconception that sensemaking is an individualistic process. Rather, Weick claims that “those who forget that sensemaking is a social process miss a constant substrate that shapes interpretations and interpreting” (Weick, 1995, p. 39). He furthers this argument by stating that “conduct is contingent on the conduct of others, whether those others are imagined or physically present” (Weick, 1995, p. 39). This presents a problem for communicators when trying to provide messages during a crisis.

While an organization may not be able to ever overcome previous experiences or imagined counterparts, this does show the importance in communicating to everyone involved. Rather than selecting a few members of upper-level management or relying on the media to break the news, the organization should explain the crisis to everyone affected to by the event.

The fifth property is particularly interesting in that Weick argues that sensemaking never starts. His logic for this is that “pure duration never stops” (Weick, 1995, p. 43). Specifically, Weick believes that “people are always in the middle of things, which become things, only when those same people focus on the past from some point beyond it” (Weick, 1995, p. 43). This becomes important during a crisis because it speaks to the validity of continually providing messages to stakeholders. Since an individual is always taking in new information to make sense of the situation, continual messages should be provided.

In the sixth property, Weick explains that because the process of sensemaking is so quick, it must be studied by extracted cues. This is because we are more likely to see the products of sensemaking rather than the process. He argues that “to counteract this, we need to watch how people deal with prolonged puzzles that defy sensemaking, puzzles such as paradoxes, dilemmas, and inconceivable events” (Weick, 1995, p. 49). He furthers this by saying that to understand the process, individuals also “need to pay close attention to ways people notice, extract cues, and embellish that which they extract” (Weick, 1995, p. 49). Some, like Starbuck and Milliken (1988), find this to be divided into two stages: noticing and sensemaking. The process of noticing may include classifying, filtering and comparing. This differs from sensemaking in that it refers more to deciding what the noticed cues may mean (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Weick, 1995). This would imply that the process is then two-fold and organizations attempting to communicate during a crisis should be aware of that.

Their messages should be noticeable so that the victim may begin to classify, filter and compare that information, ultimately leading to effectively making sense of the situation.

The seventh and final property is that of plausibility rather than accuracy. Interestingly, Weick suggests that while accuracy may be nice, it is not a requirement for sensemaking. Rather, “the strength of sensemaking as a perspective derives from the fact that it does not rely on accuracy and its model is not object perception” (Weick, 1995, p. 57). Instead, sensemaking relies on plausibility, which entails “pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality” (Weick, 1995, p. 57). While this may be beneficial in dealing with crises involving unethical CEO’s, messages disseminated with speed in mind rather than quality, or misunderstandings, may prove problematic in a crisis. In particular, a crisis that is so tragic or large that it almost does not seem plausible, may actually hinder the sensemaking of affected individuals.

In addition to the seven properties, Weick (1995), suggests there are also two common opportunities for organizational sensemaking: ambiguity and uncertainty. Ambiguity embraces the “shock of confusion” by referring to an “ongoing stream that supports several different interpretations at the same time” (Weick, 1995, p. 91). This differs from uncertainty which is the shock of ignorance and essentially implies a lack of information or direction (Weick, 1995).

In terms of establishing the most effective organizational communicative practices, Weick et al. (2005) suggest using sensemaking to fill in the gaps of organizational theory regarding power, emotion, and shared understandings as well as several other issues. Furthermore, in order to achieve enacted sensemaking through capacity, which is the extent to which individuals feel capable of doing something about the crisis, Weick suggests that

organizations should be made of “heterogeneous teams of diverse people with sufficient mutual respect that they maintain dense interaction with one another” as well as instill in their employees a sense of importance and responsibility in all levels of management (Weick, 1988, p. 313). This level of ownership in the organization may impact the capacity of the individual to act during the crisis. In order to aid in this goal, training manuals and documents should avoid ambiguity and include enactment themes by including verbs such as intervene, manual control, alter, design, solve and try (Weick, 1988). This encompasses an element of instructional communication which can become invaluable to the sensemaking process.

This key component of instruction can only be useful if actually communicated effectively. Communication is crucial to the sensemaking process; particularly during a crisis. Since organizations can help engage the sensemaking process, they become ethically responsible to do so through efficient communication during a tragic event.

**Crisis Communication.** Once a crisis hits, an organization must effectively respond to the situation. Coombs (2012) explains that this communication presents unusual dilemmas in that the organization must work internally and externally. The organization must gather and process information internally in order to make informed decisions. These conclusions and desired actions must then be passed along to external stakeholders by addressing two issues: form and content. The form of a crisis message response embodies practices like responding quickly through relevant channels, consistently and openly; whereas the content of messages focuses on the type of information that should be included (Coombs, 2012).

Coombs (2012) outlines the content of such crises responses by suggesting three message categories: instructing information, adjusting information and reputation

management. He contends that instructing information should focus on telling stakeholders what they should do in order to physically protect themselves during the crisis. This information should be followed by adjusting information which should address the psychological stress resulting from uncertainty and concerns about potential harm caused during the crisis. Finally, the organization should employ these practices in order to secure the organization's reputation from the vantage point of stakeholders (Coombs, 2012). While there are three categories of messages, there may be overlap between them. For example, adjusting messages may ease psychological stress while also providing the organization with positive messages of reputation management. A lack of messages, or messages without the three elements outlined by Coombs (2012), will hinder the ability of victims to make sense of the situation.

### **Instructing, Adjusting and Reputation Management.**

*Instructing.* Coombs contends that instructing information should focus on telling stakeholders what they should do to physically protect themselves during the crisis. As people are the primary concern during a crisis, providing information to keep them safe from harm should come first (Coombs, 2012). Unfortunately, there is a myth that the public will panic if given information about the crisis (Seeger, 2006). However, Sellnow and Sellnow support providing information through the “instructional dynamic of risk communication” (2010, p. 113). These messages should seek to explain the risks to stakeholders as well as provide information about what stakeholders can do to protect themselves. Seeger (2006) states that

the public has the right to know what risks it faces, and ongoing efforts should be made to inform and educate the public using science-based risk assessments. At the same time, public concerns about risk should be accepted as legitimate. During a

crisis, the public should be told what is happening, and organizations managing crises have a responsibility to share this information. (p. 238)

This dynamic is beneficial to both parties involved, in that, stakeholders need to know what is going on and, by providing instruction, the organization gives the perception that they are in control of the situation (Coombs, 2007a).

In addition to providing messages with instructional content relevant to personal safety and well-being, Coombs (2007a) suggests instructional messages should also include a second element: business continuity. During a crisis this could mean many things ranging from whether or not to keep the business open to repairing damaged equipment.

Additionally, efforts must be made to communicate these changes in response to questions such as “When and where do employees report to work? When and where are deliveries to be made? Is the supply chain interrupted, and if so, how long is it expected to be?” (Coombs, 2007a, p. 134). These questions and others can be remedied by contacting business stakeholders and providing specific instructions (Coombs, 2007a).

***Adjusting.*** Adjusting information is the second element of effective crisis message content. This information should address the psychological stress resulting from uncertainty and concerns about potential harm caused during a crisis (Coombs, 2012). The need for this element of message construction and a description is outlined by Coombs:

Crises are traumatic incidents that can produce debilitating levels of stress. Traumatic stress incidents overwhelm a person’s ability to cope. Seeing people injured or killed in accidents, workplace violence or natural disasters all qualify as traumatic stress incidents. Immediate and long-term interventions, such as defusing and debriefing, may be necessary to help employees and perhaps other stakeholders to adjust properly. (Coombs, 2007a, p. 136)

Examples of long-term adjusting information may be considered the provision of access to help lines or counseling services. The adjusting stage embraces the idea that in order to

combat some of the side effects of being involved in a crisis, stakeholders need to feel reassured. This occurs when they are provided information about what happened and believe that the organization has the situation under control (Coombs, 2007a). This can be accomplished by providing “corrective action” information which details preventative measures the organization may be taking to avoid a similar crisis (Coombs, 2007a, p. 135). Corrective action is beneficial because it assures stakeholders that their safety is a concern which can, in turn, ease psychological stress (Sellnow, Ulmer, & Snider, 1998). Corrective action can be accompanied by or furthered with actions of renewal.

Discourse of renewal should extend “beyond image restoration to a post-crisis innovation and adaptation of the organization” (Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007, p. 131). Renewal may be seen as “an optimistic discourse that provides a vision for the organization as it moves beyond a crisis” (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2009, p. 304). Often, these messages may be more natural following an event and are not intent on “protecting the organization’s image or escaping blame” (Ulmer, et al., 2007, p. 131). Effective discourse of renewal messages should be prospective, “focusing on the future rather than trying to explain the past” (Veil, Sellnow, & Heald, 2011, p. 169). This sentiment requires an element of optimism which allows individuals involved to stop dwelling on the obviously negative side effects of a crisis (Ulmer, et al., 2009). Optimistic messages may be the most beneficial in that they can foster change in the way the crisis is viewed and the lessons learned from the unfortunate circumstances. A sense of narrative may form during this stage of discourse in that survivors become warriors and rescue workers become heroes (Veil, Sellnow, et al., 2011). Renewal discourse also involves effective leadership. Just as leadership is to blame in communication-gone-wrong, effective leadership can be “instrumental forces for renewal and

overcoming crises” (Ulmer, et al., 2007, p. 132). However, in order for renewal to be effective, the organization must have a favorable reputation or promises will “ring hollow” (Coombs, 2007a, p. 136).

***Reputation Management.*** The third area of crisis communication content includes messages aimed at reputation management in order to secure the organization’s reputation from the vantage point of stakeholders (Coombs, 2012). While many crisis response strategies exist, the difficulty is finding the appropriate strategy for the crisis at hand (Coombs, 2007a). One suggested method for selecting a response strategy is use of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). As opposed to previous research which indicated always responding to crisis with apologia, SCCT provides a situation approach to protect the organization’s reputation by selecting appropriate crisis response strategies (Coombs & Holladay, 2002). This theory, which is based on Attribution Theory, suggests that a person will attribute responsibility for an event and experience an emotional reaction to the circumstances.

According to Perrow, crisis events can be divided into two categories: accidents and incidents. Accidents are seen as “unintended damage to people or objects that affects the functioning of the system” (Perrow, 1984, p. 63). Incidents are seen as a lesser evil with no sustained damages (Perrow, 1984). Understanding the variations in what is and is not perceived to be an accident or an incident becomes crucial when assessing reputational harm and the evaluation of stakeholders. This identification may influence or be influenced by organizational credibility.

An organization’s credibility is essential during a crisis. “The credibility an organization develops prior to a crisis is particularly valuable during a crisis. Such credibility



translates into believability and trust between the public and those seeking to manage the event” (Seeger, 2006, p. 239). In fact, according to Coombs and Holladay (2006) a “favorable reputation acts as a buffer against reputation withdraws” resulting in a halo effect that can protect the organization’s reputation from loss (p. 125). This differs from the velcro effect in that an “unfavorable prior reputation acts like velcro and attracts additional reputational damage” (Coombs & Holladay, 2006, p. 126). To avoid this consequence, Seeger (2006) claims that positive credibility can be achieved through ongoing interaction with the public.

Positive credibility is crucial because stakeholders may attribute greater crisis responsibility to an organization that has suffered from previous accidents/incidents than if the organization has no history of crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2001). Similarly, the prior relationship reputation examines whether or not the organization had mistreated stakeholders in the past. If so, stakeholders may once again attribute greater crisis responsibility to the organization than if the organization had a great relationship with stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2001).

Once an appropriate crisis cluster (victim, accidental or preventative) has been identified, the organization must then adopt crisis response strategies. These strategies are used “to repair the reputation, to reduce negative affect and to prevent negative behavioral intentions” (Coombs, 2007b, p. 170). Response strategies acknowledged by SCCT are divided into two categories: primary crisis response strategies and secondary crisis response strategies. As outlined in Table 1, primary response strategies are denial strategies and include attacking the accuser, denial of the incident, creation of a scapegoat, formation of an excuse, justification of the event, compensation of victims and apology to the public.

Secondary response strategies are bolstering strategies and include reminder, ingratiation and victimage (Coombs, 2007b, p. 170).

Table 1

SCCT Crisis Response Strategies

<p><i>Primary crisis response strategies</i></p> <p>Deny crisis response strategies</p> <p><i>Attack the accuser</i> : Crisis manager confronts the person or group claiming something is wrong with the organization.</p> <p><i>Denial</i>: Crisis manager asserts that there is no crisis.</p> <p><i>Scapegoat</i>: Crisis manager blames some person or group outside of the organization for the crisis.</p> <p>Diminish crisis response strategies</p> <p><i>Excuse</i>: Crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis.</p> <p><i>Justification</i>: Crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis.</p> <p>Rebuild crisis response strategies</p> <p><i>Compensation</i>: Crisis manager offers money or other gifts to victims.</p> <p><i>Apology</i> : Crisis manager indicates the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.</p> <p><i>Secondary crisis response strategies</i></p> <p>Bolstering crisis response strategies</p> <p><i>Reminder</i>: Tell stakeholders about the past good works of the organization.</p> <p><i>Ingratiation</i>: Crisis manager praises stakeholders and/or reminds them of past good works by the organization.</p> <p><i>Victimage</i>: Crisis managers remind stakeholders that the organization is a victim of the crisis too.</p>
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Even though the Tokyo Disney Resort did not cause the crisis, their response was still of utmost importance. Aside from a failed response affecting the sensemaking capability of guests, an inadequate or inappropriate response could lead to poor messages of reputation management. As outlined by Coombs (2007b) messages with informing and adjusting information can suffice in a victim crisis when the organization has no history of similar crises and a positive, or at least neutral reputation.

Based upon this mentality, the prior reputation of Disney will impact how their messages are perceived. Furthermore, while their favorable reputation allows them to only

respond with messages of informing and adjusting information, the Tokyo Disney Resort can utilize messages of reputation management to further emphasize their positive reputation. Doing so can help to bolster their reputation for the next crisis just as a positive reputation helped to bolster their reputation in this crisis.

As outlined in the aforementioned three sections, messages containing elements of instruction, adjusting information and reputation management become crucial during a crisis in many ways. They help ensure the safety and subsequent well-being of stakeholders during the crisis as well as solidify a positive image for the organization involved. While this study primarily examines the content of crisis communication, one particular channel of communication is analyzed: social media.

**Social Media.** According to Crowe, “as the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century dawns, the biggest challenge for emergency managers is the need to modify long-standing philosophies on how to communicate with citizens regarding emergency preparedness and management issues that might affect them” (2011, p. 409). Suggesting social media as a response to this problem, Crowe states that through social media “a shared connection of people and/or organizations is created with common values and interests” which can result in “an inherently higher trust factor for information because of the shared network of friends, contacts and organizations” (2011, p. 410). However, social media presents an interesting opportunity and challenge for communicators in that, contrary to traditional one-way media communication, “social media allows anybody to become a producer of such content, and deliver it through interactive communication...” (Lee, 2010, p. 112).

As such, proactive use of social media is suggested for crisis managers. This means that ideal use of social media should be used “to both disseminate information and monitor

public comments regarding their agency and/or community event” (Crowe, 2011, p. 416). Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011) further the role of social media in risk and crisis communication by adding elements of social media to risk and crisis communication best practices.

While many social media channels exist (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube, etc.), Twitter could be considered the “second most important social media site for emergency management practitioners” (Crowe, 2011, p. 410). As of 2011, Twitter had 105 million users and is ideal for crisis communication because of the speed with which information is readily available and the ease of access from a mobile device. Additionally, Twitter allows consumers to redistribute quality information with ease by simply retweeting (Crowe, 2011). A focus group conducted by Hjorth and Kim (2011), shows that during the crisis in Japan, Twitter was used by victims of the earthquake. While participants did not rely on social media, like Twitter, for solace and comfort during the event, participants did indicate that they checked and posted on Twitter to receive information as well as to let everyone know that they were safe (Hjorth & Kim, 2011). In fact, according to an article in Advertising Age, “the word "earthquake" reached 19,360 tweets per hour when the earthquake first struck, and peaked at 35,430 Twitter posts an hour as people started waking up in the U.S.” (2011, para. 5).

Coverage of the earthquake in Japan was also posted on YouTube. Within hours of the quake, “firsthand videos showing falling debris and collapsing buildings sprang up on YouTube” (Ad Age Staff, 2011, para. 3). While YouTube may often be perceived differently than its social media counterparts, Yoganarasimhan (2012) claims that it is an active social networking community that resembles other social media networks. In fact, YouTube allows

users to “friend other members and interact with them through tools such as comment-boxes, messages and activity feed subscriptions” with the “added advantage of video-sharing functionality” (Yoganarasimhan, 2012, p. 114).

Both Twitter and YouTube, along with other social media channels, are not only growing in popularity, but also in organizational necessity. Ansell, Boin and Keller suggest “real-time communications” as a method to enact distributed sensemaking (2010, p. 201). In fact, “leveraging social media, which allows direct sharing of information in a timely and accurate manner, can relieve uncertainty” (Veil, et al., 2011, p. 114). This is of monumental importance for an organization seeking to initiate effective sensemaking.

In summary, crises, including natural disasters, require organizational response. Organization’s become ethically responsible to stakeholders to aid in achieving effective sensemaking. This can be accomplished by providing messages of instructing, adjusting and reputation management and through distributing said messages through social media channels. In order to analyze the effectiveness of social media and messages of instructing, adjusting and reputation management in fostering sensemaking during a crisis, the Tokyo Disney Resort’s response to the earthquake/tsunami/nuclear crisis of 2011 provides an interesting case study.

During this analysis, the following research questions will be answered:

RQ1: How did the Tokyo Disney Resort foster sensemaking through instructing, adjusting and reputation management messages?

RQ2: How did the Tokyo Disney Resort utilize social media to deliver these messages to stakeholders following the crisis?

In order to answer these research questions and provide a thorough analysis of the case, the following methods were employed.

## **Methods**

Case studies “provide a method to investigate a contemporary event involving risk within a real life context, and they contribute to enhanced knowledge of complex social phenomena” (Sellnow, Ulmer, Seeger, & Littlefield, 2009, p. 54). To develop the context of the case, the researcher analyzed news reports, blogs, YouTube videos, tweets and scholarly articles addressing the March 2011 earthquake/tsunami/nuclear crisis that impacted the country of Japan. Specifically, coverage focused on the crisis at the Tokyo Disneyland Resort in Urayasu, Chiba, Japan. The data captured were analyzed for messages sent to the public during the initial crisis or immediately following the crisis. The data were also assessed for proof of crisis preparation and response during the crisis. The study explicitly focused on crisis communication message content in terms of instructing, adjusting and reputation management (Coombs, 2007a, 2012).

In addition to the methods outlined below, the researcher conducted two interviews with English speaking cast members present at the Tokyo Disney Resort during the time of the crisis. One cast member also provided correspondence from the Tokyo Disney Resort during and following the event. The information gained through these interviews and provided material is used to inform the evidence gathered through analysis of news coverage, Twitter and YouTube. While additional interviews would have been helpful, the researcher experienced difficulty in obtaining more than two interviews based upon the secrecy of internal Disney communication and the loyalty of cast members to the organization.

**News Coverage.** In order to develop the background of the case and provide information to answer Research Question 1, the researcher searched Ebsco, Google, the Walt Disney Company website, the Disney Parks Blog, the Tokyo Disney Resort website and the OLC Group website for “Tokyo Disney” and “earthquake.” While dozens of news articles were reviewed, content from nine were included in the case description and analysis. Additionally, the researcher located five relevant press releases and company information from these sources to help build the case and provide examples of organizational communication through and by the company.

**Twitter.** To effectively answer Research Question 2 and study the use of social media in this particularly crisis, the researcher examined Tweets related to the crisis. After searching Disney handles via Twitter, the Disney name was associated with thirteen verified Disney twitter accounts: Walt Disney World (@WaltDisneyWorld), Disneyland Resort (@Disneyland), Disney Parks (@Disneyparks), Disney Animation (@DisneyAnimation), Radio Disney (@RADIODISNEY), Disney Memories (@DisneyMemories), Disney Cruise Line (@DisneyCruise), Disney Channel PR (@DisneyChanelPR), Walt Disney Pictures (@DisneyPictures), Disney Music (@DisneyMusic), Disney Pixar (@DisneyPixar), Disney Store (@DisneyStore) and Disney (@Disney). According to Twitter, “any account with a Verified Badge is a Verified Account. Twitter uses this to establish authenticity of well known accounts so users can trust that a legitimate source is authoring their Tweets” (Twitter.com, 2012, para. 4). While many Twitter accounts exist for Disney fans, and many of those Twitter accounts host large numbers of followers, they cannot boast that they post official Disney information.

Once official Twitter accounts/handles were identified, the researcher used a Twitter research tool called Topsy to search each handle for the phrases “Japan” and “earthquake.” A total of seven tweets emerged and the researcher was able to obtain information about how many times each of the initial tweets were retweeted, which helps to provide support for the relevance and need for the information.

**YouTube Videos.** YouTube videos were used not only as an outlet to continue looking at social media but, as an indicator of immediate dissemination of messages of instructing, adjusting and reputation management. In order to gain access into what happened during and immediately after the earthquake, the researcher looked at YouTube videos posted by individuals at the Tokyo Disney Resort when the earthquake occurred. Using the search terms “Disney” and “earthquake,” the researcher was able to locate 27 relevant videos which were then placed in a YouTube playlist. Videos dealing with earthquakes at other Disney parks, or the earthquake/tsunami/nuclear crisis outside of the Tokyo Disney Resort were excluded. Each video was analyzed by the researcher using the questions listed in Appendix A.



## Chapter 2: Case Background and Disney's Response

To understand the response of the Tokyo Disney Resort, one must examine the full extent of the Disney name. Since prior reputation affects message perceptions (Coombs, 2009), organizational credibility is crucial in developing message content. Furthermore, a detailed explanation of the crisis must be outlined as the events on March 11, 2011, were continually changing. This cascading effect of the crisis impacted both the messages distributed and the speed with which additional information could be provided. Once an understanding of Disney culture, the Tokyo Disney Resort and the crisis has been established, Tokyo Disney Resort's response will be outlined based on news coverage, Twitter and YouTube videos.

**Disney Culture.** While some may criticize the organizational culture of the Disney company (Cloud, 2001; Ellwood, 1998), one cannot deny its impact.

Disneyland and Disney World have generated an almost inexhaustible literature—from the cerebral to the mundane – as to the causes for their enormous success. They have been treated as ritual spaces, as modern forms of utopia, as symbols that work, as contemporary playgrounds for adults and children, as the culminations of intermingled historical processes that stretch back to medieval fairs and festivals, and as the orderly output of a sterling American cooperation where the workers are happy, the managers good looking, and all the customers above average.” (Van Maanen, 1992, p. 6)

The Disney culture is inevitably far reaching and “products and images have long been part of a world culture and are virtually impossible to escape anywhere” (Van Maanen, 1992, p. 9). Given Disney's incorporation into daily life, Disney becomes an important part of a child's upbringing. This loyalty remains as we age, and studies have shown “how deeply penetrating Disney's influence [has] been” (Chyng Feng Sun & Scharrer, 2004, p. 42).

Additionally, with Disney's expansion from the U.S. into other countries (China, Japan and France) its global influence grows as well. According to Fung and Lee (2009)

Disney has moved from a symbol of Americanism to that of globalization. In fact, they argue that no one represents a “conquering cultural army” better than Disney because “in the process of hybridization, local culture is transformed into global culture, and global culture becomes part of local culture” (Fung & Lee, 2009, p. 197). As Buckingham (2007) argues, this strategy may be crucial for success. He states that “as they increasingly engage with world markets, Disney and other cultural producers are having to suppress elements that might be perceived to be too culturally specific in favour of those that seem to speak to some universal, trans-cultural notion of childhood” (Buckingham, 2007, p. 48). Evidence of this globalization is evident at the Tokyo Disney Resort, which was the first expansion of the American theme parks (Van Maanen, 1992).

**Tokyo Disney Resort.** The Tokyo Disney Resort is located in Urayasu, Chiba, Japan, approximately 10 hours from Honshu, Japan, the estimated center of the 9.0 earthquake. Despite the distance from the approximate epicenter of the initial quake, Urayasu still suffered loss and damage from the event, including ground liquefaction. Ground liquefaction causes soil to act like quicksand—a problem resulting from the fact that three-fourths of the city sits on a landfill (Fukue, 2011). The bulk of Tokyo Disney’s property was not damaged by the earthquake; however, certain areas, specifically parking structures, were damaged due to liquefaction (The Yomiuri Shimbun, 2011).

Physical damages were limited; however, this research shows that Disney was not immune to the uncertainty surrounding the tragedies of March 11, 2011. While entertaining approximately 60,000 guests a day (Zdanowicz, 2011), the Tokyo Disney resort had to work quickly to communicate with guests and cast members during the crises.

Since the opening of Tokyo Disneyland in 1983, the Tokyo Disney Resort has embraced a central marketing strategy: they are a “100% copy of the American original” (Raz, 2000, p. 77).

At first glance, Tokyo Disneyland is a physical and social copy of Disneyland in Southern California – a clone created six-thousand miles distant and perhaps something of a cultural bomb dropped on perfect strangers. The castle, the flags, the rides, the entertainment, the orderly waterways and impeccably clean grounds, the ever-smiling ride operators and Disney characters that prance about amusing the old and young alike; even the crowds, the traffic, the smog, the lengthy waits for attractions, the summer heat, the suburban sprawl surrounding the park all seem in harmony with the spirit and letter of the 37 year old original. Even the gate receipts for this detailed replica meet and exceed corporate expectations. (Van Maanen, 1992, p. 9)

This mentality allows Tokyo Disney to be seen as “a symbol of global Americanization and cultural imperialism” (Raz, 2000, p. 77). Therefore, while being part owned by Oriental Land Co., Ltd, the Tokyo Disney Land Resort chooses to identify heavily with Disney’s American image. As support for these claims, the following list outlines operational guidelines at the Tokyo Disneyland Resort. The list is organized in order of importance and is the guide for all operational decisions – the same guide is used by all Disney parks around the world (OLC Group, 2011d).

**Safety**- The safety of those who work and play at Walt Disney Parks and Resorts is our most important responsibility; it enables us to create an atmosphere in which people feel safe and at ease.

**Courtesy** - Based on the belief that Guests should be treated like VIPs (or Very Important Persons), we also aspire to offer friendly, genuine hospitality; not just being polite, but providing service from the standpoint of the Guests.

**Show** - Cast Members are part of the show and should treat every day as "opening day," reflecting that philosophy in their grooming and behavior, in the show they provide, and the welcome that they give to Guests, even when they are inspecting a facility or cleaning one of the park's facilities.

**Efficiency** - Prioritizing efficiency over safety, courtesy, and show is no way to spread happiness among our Guests. By focusing on safety, courtesy, and show, and working as a team, efficiency will ultimately be achieved. (OLC Group, 2011d)

This strong unifying operational outline works to solidify the bond between the Tokyo Disneyland Resort and its American counterparts. This sentiment was also embraced with the involvement and dissemination of messages from American based Disney parks and companies during the tragic earthquake/tsunami/nuclear crisis in March 2011.

**Earthquake/Tsunami/Nuclear Crisis.** The cascading crisis event began at 2:46 p.m. JST (Japanese Standard Time) when a 9.0 earthquake (the fifth largest ever recorded) began approximately 230 miles northeast of Tokyo, Japan (Jones, 2011). Within minutes, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami warning from Japan to the west coast of the United States, triggering alerts in more than 50 countries and territories (CNN Wire Staff, 2011). Within an hour, flooding began along the Japanese coast with Tsunami waves of up to 30 feet high. The waves swept away villages, cars, boats and trains, collapsed building, severed roads and highways and caused fires to break out in multiple locations (Jones, 2011).

The impact of both of these events caused damage to the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, and by 10:29 p.m. the cooling system was reported to be not working. Thousands of people living near the plant were evacuated (CNN Wire Staff, 2011; Jones, 2011). At 5 a.m. on March 12, a nuclear emergency was declared for the Fukushima power plant citing loss of power from the earthquake and tsunami. At 6:22 p.m., following recurring 6.2-6.3 earthquakes and continual tsunami flooding, explosions were recorded at the plant. Fires and more explosions followed in subsequent days (Jones, 2011).

Each level of this crisis seemed to ignite a new element of emergency and tragedy. The earthquake caused the tsunami, which caused flooding and loss of power which ultimately led to three meltdowns at the Fukushima power plant. This sequence of events is known as a cascading crisis which “implies chains or sequences of disruptive events and

actions that have increasingly negative impacts and effects over time” (Gotham, 2011, p. 3). According to Perrow, failures due to dependence is known as tight coupling. Unlike loosely coupled events, where events were caused by the same sequence, the initial earthquake caused the rest of the crises based upon their connectivity (Perrow, 1984). This combination of both man-made and natural disasters led to immense tragedy resulting in the loss of more than 18,000 lives and irreversible damage to homes and communities (McCurry, 2011).

**Tokyo Disney Resort’s Response.** As evidenced in YouTube videos, initial messages from the company were delivered via park-wide speakers and began within one to one and half minutes following the beginning of the earthquake. The instructions, which were presented in Chinese, English and Japanese (jtcent, 2011b), communicated the following:

Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. We have just experienced an earthquake. Please move away from the buildings to an open area and wait there until our cast members can instruct you further. Please be assured that the park has been designed with earthquake safety in mind. We will provide you with more detailed information as soon as possible. Thank you. (Shyroque, 2011)

At Tokyo Disney Sea, a water parade was going on when the earthquake began so the standard message listed above was preceded by the following announcement: “Ladies and Gentlemen, we are very sorry but due to unforeseen circumstances, we must cancel the remainder of the...” (chaiteastasty, 2011). Throughout the earthquake and subsequent announcement, characters and performers on their floats continued to animate and wave at guests (chaiteastasty, 2011).

While the first message appears to have been pre-recorded, the Tokyo Disney Resort released another message via the park-wide speaker system at 4:34 p.m. announcing the following:

The buildings and attractions are now being checked for safety measures. Please follow the instructions of the cast members. The operations of trains, namely the JRK lines and [...] lines have been cancelled. All highways are currently closed. Tokyo Disney Resort will make further announcements later. (jtcent, 2011b)

At approximately 5:17 p.m., the Tokyo Disney Resort issued a park-wide speaker announcement saying that the earthquake they had experienced earlier had been measured at 7.5 in magnitude and that all rides and attractions were closed. This announcement was followed at approximately 7:31 p.m. when the Tokyo Disney Resort used their park-wide speaker system to again, deliver a follow-up message. The announcement stated:

Announcement from Tokyo Disney Resort: We would like to provide an update on the status of public transportation to all our guests. Due to the Tohoku region Pacific coast earthquake which occurred today, bullet trains, and local trains in the JR East region, metro region and Tohoku area are suspended all day. The possibility as to whether the Tozai Line and the Tokyo Metro system will be resumed is still unknown. Although the parks are not closed, we recommend that guests stay inside the park for the time being. For more details, the Tokyo Disney Resort will make further announcements after this. (roombaguide, 2011)

Amidst delivering messages, analysis of YouTube videos indicates that cast members worked to provide instructions by motioning for guests to sit down, move, or cover their heads. Additionally, cast members provided blankets, food, water (Smith, 2011b) and various other commodities including Duffy bears (stuffed bears that could be used as shelter from the rain, something to sit on, or psychological comfort), cardboard boxes and trash bags to guests who had to stay at the resort due to transportation challenges (jtcent, 2011b).

Individuals began posting messages on the Disney Parks Blog on March 11<sup>th</sup>. Messages with information explaining that Tokyo Disney employees were reporting only “minor injuries” and “minimal property damage” were posted (Smith, 2011b, para. 1). While also providing information about the safety of the Disney Wonder cruise ship and the new Disney Hawaiian resort, Aulani, the article also stated:

The safety of our guests and cast members is always our first concern so both parks will remain closed on Saturday to allow for a thorough inspection of our attractions and facilities...Our thoughts and sympathy go out to our guests, fellow Disney cast members and all of the people in Japan affected by this terrible disaster. We'll share any additional information today by posting updates at the top of this page. (Smith, 2011b, para. 1 & 3)

On March 11, the Disney Company released the following message from the Walt Disney World, Disney Parks and the Disneyland Resort Twitter accounts: "Our thoughts and sympathy go out to our guests, fellow Disney cast members & everyone in Japan affected by the earthquake <http://bit.ly/h4ugpv>" (Disneyland, 2011a; Disney Parks, 2011a; Waltdisneyworld, 2011a). The tweet from Waltdisneyworld was retweeted 48 times; from Disney Parks, 76 times; and Disneyland, 49 times (Topsy.com, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d). The link at the end of the Tweet directed viewers to the Disney Parks Blog article posted that day entitled "Update on Tokyo Disney Resort, Aulani, and the Disney Wonder" (Smith, 2011b).

Four days later, on March 15, another blog post discussing the events in Japan appeared on the Disney Parks Blog site. It began by stating "First and foremost, our hearts go out to all of the people in Japan who have been impacted by last week's devastating earthquake in Japan" (Smith, 2011a, para. 1). The blog then shared that the Tokyo Disney Resort would remain closed for the week as the company continued to assess damages and evaluate safety concerns, mentioning that most of the issues had to do with local transportation systems. However, the blog did state that despite transportation challenges, all guests had been able to leave the resort. Additionally, the blog announced that a decision regarding the operational status of the Tokyo Disney Resort would be made on March 21 and that individuals could continue to check the Disney Parks Blog for more information (Smith, 2011a). The blog then shared a new philanthropic plan:

In response to this disaster, The Walt Disney Company is making a \$2.5 million contribution to the Red Cross to help aid in the disaster relief. The company has also coordinated a charitable giving program for all Disney employees and will match donations, dollar for dollar, up to an additional \$1 million... The thoughts and good wishes of the entire Disney company go to our colleagues in Japan, their friends and families and all of the Japanese people as they begin their recovery efforts in this difficult time. (Smith, 2011a, para. 1 & 3)

Once again linking their blog updates to their Twitter account, the Walt Disney World, Disney Parks and Disneyland Resort Twitter accounts issued another synchronized message. The message stated: “Here's how we're assisting the worldwide recovery efforts in Japan <http://bit.ly/hEJu4Q>” (Disneyland, 2011b; Disney Parks, 2011b; Waltdisneyworld, 2011b). The tweet from Waltdisneyworld was retweeted 24 times; from Disney Parks, 22 times; and Disneyland, 28 times) (Topsy.com, 2012b, 2012c, 2012d). The link directed individuals to the Disney Parks Blog article entitled “Japan Earthquake Update – March 15” (Smith, 2011a).

Interestingly, the “Disney” Twitter page, which is verified as the Twitter counterpart to the official Disney Facebook page, did not release the same Tweets as its corresponding Disney Twitter informants. The only relevant Disney Tweet appeared on March 15, 2011 as a retweet from the Red Cross. The Tweet said “RT @RedCross In the US text REDCROSS to 90999 to give \$10 for Japan earthquake and Pacific Tsunami. Online: <http://bit.ly/cNuH67> #helpJapan” (Disney, 2011). This RedCross retweet was retweeted from the Disney site 150 times.

The OLC Group posted a news release to their website on April 1 with images from the parks and descriptions of the conditions of buildings and facilities. Images were cited as being taken on March 24 and 25 in an effort to show “no major damage to the buildings and facilities in Tokyo Disneyland or Tokyo Disneysea” (OLC Group, 2011e, p. 1). The OLC



Group admitted that “there were some minor cracks on the grounds of some areas, but they were not of a nature that would jeopardize the safety of the Parks, and are currently being repaired” (OLC Group, 2011e, p. 1). Additionally, signs of liquefaction were admitted to be found in one parking area but were being addressed. Further discussion of liquefaction was found in the news release:

Due to preventative measures against liquefaction that were already in place at Tokyo Disneyland and Tokyo DisneySea, there was no liquefaction at the Parks, with the exception of one portion of the flat parking area. Liquefaction was prevented because at the time of construction of Tokyo Disneyland and Tokyo DisneySea, the ground foundation of the entire area was fortified 10 to 15 meters in depth. This was accomplished using the Sand Compaction Pile technique, a method that drives columns of compacted sand into the ground at regular intervals, thereby increasing the density of the ground, which prevented liquefaction from occurring at the Parks. The ground under the Disney Hotels, Ikspiari, *Cirque du Soleil* Theatre Tokyo, and Disney Resort Line was also strengthened using the same method. (OLC Group, 2011e, p. 1)

As of April 8, 2011, neither the Disney Parks Blog nor any other official Disney sites had discussed a reopening date for the parks. Their absence was noted and one CNN blogger described it in an eerie fashion:

Walking around the sight security patrols are at every gate, and where there are usually lights and people everywhere to be seen, today there was darkness and silence instead. I caught a glimpse of the Disney monorail as it passed over head. The lights were on but there were no passengers on board and all of the train stations were closed! The 60,000 visitors that usually visit the theme parks every day were reduced to zero! Even a month after the earthquake and there are no signs when the Parks will open again. (Cook, 2011, para. 2)

News coverage also addressed the continued closing of the parks, stating that “although nothing inside them was damaged, both Disneyland and DisneySea are closed because of Tepco's unpredictable rolling blackouts, according to Hiroshi Suzuki, spokesman for Oriental Land Co., operator of the two parks” (Fukue, 2011, para. 5).

On April 12, the OLC Group posted a news release on their website announcing that the Tokyo Disneyland theme park, Disney's Ambassador Hotel and the Tokyo Disneyland Hotel were scheduled to reopen Friday, April 15, 2011. This left Tokyo DisneySea and the Hotel MiraCosta still closed. The park would be operating only during daylight hours in an effort to conserve power and a part of each ticket sold through May 14, 2011, would be donated to the Japanese Red Cross. Detailed explanations regarding re-opening, power saving efforts and updates on other facilities were included (OLC Group, 2011c). On April 13, the Disney Parks Blog reiterated the opening dates as well as the philanthropic component regarding ticket sales (Smith, 2011c).

On April 28, an official notice appeared on the Tokyo Disney Resort website. The notice explained that while the parks had been temporarily closed since March 12, they were both open as of April 28, 2011.

In operating the two Parks, every effort will be made to reduce the use of electricity. And to contribute to the aid of the affected areas, we are donating 300 yen for each Guest admitted to either Tokyo Disneyland or Tokyo DisneySea through May 14. Charity wristbands are also being sold at Tokyo Disney Resort, of which its entire revenue will be donated. Furthermore, the Disney Hotels are donating 1,000 yen per room per night of stay from the room charges... We extend our apologies to our Guests and all those concerned for the considerable inconvenience caused by the temporary closures, and thank you for your continued support. (Tokyo Disney Resort, 2011a, para. 2 & 3)

The OLC Group posted a news release on their site on April 20 announcing the reopening of DisneySea on April 28 and that Tokyo Disneyland would resume nighttime operating hours on April 23 (OLC Group, 2011f). Subsequent related news releases announced that the Tokyo Disney Resort had donated 420,994,855 yen (approximately 5.4 million USD) based upon their initial ticket and resort promise (OLC Group, 2011a) and plans for financial security in case of future earthquakes (OLC Group, 2011b).

While it is evident that the Tokyo Disney Resort, combined with their American counterparts, took action during the crisis, analysis of message content is necessary to establish their crisis communication as effective. Specifically, messages should be analyzed to examine whether the sensemaking process is engaged through the information provided from the organization and whether efficient use of social media was apparent on behalf of the company. To develop these areas, actions and messages are analyzed based upon the lens formulated by Coombs (2012) which indicates messages should contain elements of instructing, adjusting and reputation management.

### Chapter 3: Analysis

Because message construction is crucial to effective crisis communication, which fosters sensemaking, this study focus on messages of instructing, adjusting and reputation management. Each of these elements is analyzed based upon the information found through investigation of news coverage surrounding the crisis, press releases issued by the Walt Disney Company, the Tokyo Disney Resort and the OLC Group. Additional factors in establishing effective message construction by the Tokyo Disney Resort are found in analysis of YouTube videos filmed in the parks during the crisis and messages communicated through Twitter and the Disney Parks Blog. While the messages are categorized according to each aspect of crisis response, Coombs (2007) suggests effective instructing and adjusting messages contribute to reputation management. Therefore, some messages seem to address multiple aspects, such as messages of condolences assisting with psychological coping and reputation management.

**Instructing.** When looking at this case through the lens of crisis response message construction, distinct examples and opportunities arise. First, the initial messages of instruction from the Tokyo Disney Resort were not only present, but succinct and efficient. The goal of instructional messages is to provide information to stakeholders to keep them safe from harm (Coombs, 2012). Within 70-80 seconds of the initial tremors, Tokyo Disney provided instruction via park-wide speakers. The initial message told guests a) what had happened, b) what they should do to remain safe, c) that the park was designed for safety, and d) that further information would be provided as soon as possible (Shyroque, 2011). Follow up messages, which were also announced park-wide, informed guests about the earthquake, transportation outside the resort, and the status of the parks (chaiteastasty, 2011;

jtcent, 2011b; roombaguide, 2011). This information was presented in a calm and clear manner in three languages in an effort to communicate with as many guests as possible (jtcent, 2011b).

The YouTube analysis was able to provide substantial evidence of instructional information. Of the 27 videos analyzed, 100% of them taken at the Tokyo Disney Resort on the day of the crisis displayed instruction or signs of previous instruction. Instructing information came from two sources: cast members and the park-wide speaker system. Signs of instruction from cast members included motioning for guests to sit down and/or cover their head, motioning for guests to move into open spaces and telling guests to get under tables.

The immediacy with which cast members began instructing guests would indicate that the Tokyo Disney Resort was not only providing instruction to guests, but had already provided instruction and training to cast members. Additionally, several YouTube videos captured managers communicating with one another and through headsets implying that further instructions were being provided to cast members as well. As a testament to their internal correspondence, one video captured what appeared to be a chef's meeting in the background (jtcent, 2011b). This indicates that the Tokyo Disney Resort had already established pre-determined meeting spots for different areas of management in case of such an emergency, thereby increasing the speed and accuracy with which they could provide instruction.

The second element of instructional messages, which should address business continuity, was also a part of the communication exhibited by the Tokyo Disney Resort. Following the earthquake, the resort shut down operation of rides while assessing damage to

the park and country. This was communicated through the park-wide speaker system to keep guests informed as to not only the business continuity of the parks but also of the transportation system outside the resort (jtcent, 2011b; roombaguide, 2011). While rides were shut down, the Tokyo Disney Resort kept guests at the park and provided food and shelter until more information was known (jtcent, 2011b). Guests were allowed to leave the park approximately five hours after the earthquake (bloisyjenkins, 2011), but were advised by the Tokyo Disney Resort not to do so (roombaguide, 2011). This expressed elements of business continuity as the parks continued to provide food, water and shelter to stakeholders as well as remain an engaged source for information surrounding the crisis.

Another aspect of instructional messages of business continuity is found in messages that were provided later about the initial closing and later reopening of the parks. While messages announcing the park's closing to assess damages were prompt (Smith, 2011b), messages announcing damages and reopening dates were not as efficient, leading to speculation and confusion (Fukue, 2011; Zdanowicz, 2011). Admittedly, with the effects and damage of the earthquake, flooding and radiation still being assessed, the reopening of the parks may not have been a priority. However, stakeholders not immediately affected by the crisis (family and friends of guests) or ones who viewed Tokyo Disney as an identifier of the level of recovery in Japan may have benefited from more timely communication.

**Adjusting.** Messages of adjusting information should address the psychological stress experienced during a crisis (Coombs, 2012). This is often accomplished by reassuring stakeholders and providing information about the crisis to ease uncertainty and increase the belief that the organization has the situation under control (Coombs, 2007a). Messages of reassurance emerged in the first correspondence from Disney when they calmly stated via

speakerphone that the park had been designed with earthquake safety in mind. This was furthered by letting guests know in the same initial message that additional information about the crisis would be provided as soon as it was available (Shyroque, 2011). Similar messages announcing that more information would be provided when it was available were mirrored on the Disney Parks Blog for stakeholders not immediately present in the parks (Smith, 2011a, 2011b).

In addition to the content of the messages, the simple fact that message were distributed in multiple languages may have helped to decrease the psychological stress for non-Japanese speaking patrons. To further this sentiment, David Landsel, a writer and resident of New York who was visiting the park that day, described how English speaking employees worked to help keep them calm:

...we were evacuated outdoors, where tens of thousands of park-goers were already out on the pavement, visibly stunned. English speaking cast members circled back every few minutes to update us, to shoot the breeze. Where are you from? New York. I love New York! Do you need to use the toilet? (Landsel, 2011, para. 11)

Acknowledgement of cultural barriers was also appreciated by American cast members who had recently arrived in Japan. These cast members had been assigned a translator who was able to help them understand the severity of the earthquake and the actions they should take (S.B. James, personal communication, January 31, 2012).

Other communicative actions taken by the Tokyo Disney Resort to help ease psychological stress can be found in the way they took care of their guests. By providing food, water, blankets (Smith, 2011a) and other means of comfort (jtcnet, 2011b), they were able to relieve uncertainty about some of the initial basic concerns often present during a crisis. The YouTube video analysis shows signs of adjusting information in approximately 44% (n=12) of the videos taken during the day of the crisis. Examples evident in the videos

include providing guests with popcorn, aluminum blankets, trashbags, cardboard boxes, Duffy bears, ponchos and water. Video footage also showed cast members directing patrons to the location of restrooms and guiding traffic with glow-in-the-dark cones.

Furthermore, the video analysis revealed multiple messages from the Tokyo Disney Resort as information became available. This information included details about the size of the earthquake they had experienced and the status of the country's transportation system. By monitoring transportation accessibility and not allowing guests to leave until it was deemed safe, the Tokyo Disney resort accepted the burden and responsibility of assessing the danger of the situation, thereby eliminating this concern from guests who might normally have to make their own decisions regarding the safety of buildings, transportation, flood levels or escalation possibilities. These strategies were effective because approximately 79% (n=22) of analyzed YouTube videos could be described as completely calm. Three other videos show initial signs of confusion or panic but ultimately reflected a calm state as well.

In addition to handling the concerns of guests, the Tokyo Disney Resort also worked to meet the psychological needs of cast members. In an e-mail dated March 15, 2011, members of the Walt Disney Animation Japan (WDAJ) Entertainment team sent an e-mail to contracted entertainment cast members stating the following:

We have spoken with EAP (Employee Assistance Programs) and their service is available to you. If you need emotional consultation or support from professional counselors, please let me know and I will inform EAP. When you need to speak with EAP you will need to let them know you are with Walt Disney Attractions Japan (our offices). EAP's Helpdesk is available from 10:00-17:00 over the phone. Toll free number in Japan is 0800-888-8300 and you can check their web site (English is available) <http://www.eapjapan.com> (S.G. John, personal communication, March 15, 2011).

This e-mail also provided contact information for the Japan Meteorological Agency, Google Person Finder and government websites (Canada, Australia, U.S. and U.K.) with nuclear



specific information. Another e-mail was sent the next day introducing the Vice President of Employee Relations as the contact person should parents “have additional questions or require further reassurance” (S.G. John, personal communication, March 16, 2011). A third e-mail was sent on March 24<sup>th</sup> addressing the return of American employees who had accepted the Tokyo Disney Resort’s offer to pay for their trip home during the park’s closure. This e-mail asked cast members to supply a date when they could return to Tokyo and included links to the UK Embassy, US Embassy and Office of the Japanese Prime Minister (S.G. John, personal communication, March 24, 2011). By providing messages with counseling services and links to official organizations that may be valuable resources to individuals dealing with the crisis, the Tokyo Disney Resort successfully provided adjusting messages.

**Reputation Management.** The third element of message construction, reputation management, was also present on behalf of the Tokyo Disney Resort during the disaster. Messages aimed at reputation management should secure the organization’s reputation from the vantage point of stakeholders (Coombs, 2012). Given the “victim” category under which this crisis fell, the Tokyo Disney Resort responded with secondary response strategies as outlined by Coombs (2007b) and SCCT. While the Tokyo Disney Resort was obviously not responsible for these tragedies and therefore not an accountable organization, they still implemented strategies to ensure positive image restoration. For example, the organization began by giving priority to guests as opposed to merchandise and profit when they began distributing Duffy bears (jtcent, 2011b) and provided food, blankets and water to guests during the crisis (Smith, 2011b).

Additional measures of image restoration can be found after the Tokyo Disney Resort decided to reopen. In an effort to ethically communicate with stakeholders, Disney utilized the crisis response strategy of bolstering by releasing pictures of the park detailing both the damage and the actions taken to remedy the situation. This same article addressed measures employed by the resort to prevent and address the main struggle of the area: liquefaction. This helped create an open and honest line of communication as well as enable stakeholders to maintain trust in the priorities and capabilities of the organization. After opening, Disney's choice to limit operational hours in order to conserve energy helped show their support and consideration of affected and still recovering areas of the nation. In fact, one YouTube video taken on the day of the park's reopening shows the following text on the bottom of the park information sheet: "Please note that other attractions, entertainment, and facilities may be suspended or the schedules may change depending on the electricity supply" (jtcent, 2011a).

Furthermore, the fact that the park donated a percentage of all profits from ticket and resort sales to the Red Cross only furthered positive image construction for the Tokyo Disney Resort (Tokyo Disney Resort, 2011a). Again, YouTube analysis provided visual evidence for these actions with a sign posted at the entrance of the park reading:

Our deepest condolences to all those suffering from the Great East Japan Earthquake. For each guest visiting the Park, Tokyo Disneyland will donate ¥300 to the Japanese Red Cross Society to aid in the restoration of the disaster stricken areas. We pray for everyone's well being and the earliest possible recovery of the affected areas (jtcent, 2011a).

These actions were bolstered by the original involvement of the Disney Company's additional donation of 2.5 million dollars to the Red Cross (Smith, 2011a).

While these monetary donations were able to communicate sympathy and community involvement, perhaps the greatest indicator of organizational attitude was found in the

verbiage used in their messages. All messages expressed heart-felt sympathy and concern for the nation and people of Japan. Phrases included sentiments like “the thoughts and good wishes of the entire Disney company go to our colleagues in Japan, their friends and families and all of the Japanese people as they begin their recovery efforts in this difficult time” (Smith, 2011a, para.3). These messages, coupled with the actions detailed above, helped solidify the priorities of the Tokyo Disney Resort and their dedication to the well-being of their stakeholders.

Given Tokyo Disney Resort’s strong alliance with their American counterparts (Raz, 2000), one can witness the halo effect, which states that “favorable reputations act as a buffer against reputation withdraws” (Coombs & Holladay, 2006, p. 124). Disney’s reputation for handling crises effectively helped to ensure credibility in the organization. For example, a guest letter sent to the Walt Disney World Resort shortly before the ten year anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks outlined the actions taken by the resort during that crisis. Once again, the Disney company utilized their park-wide speakers to effectively communicate instructions and desired actions to all guests.

Disney cast members were filling Main Street and providing assistance to anyone in need. It was very impressive; it appeared as though cast members were climbing out of the bushes. There were thousands of people that day in the Magic Kingdom, and I couldn’t help but notice the effectiveness of the evacuation, and the incredible job of moving all these people...I can not think of any other place that I would have rather been that week, than in the comfort of Walt Disney World. (D. Stansbury, personal communication, August 17, 2011)

This sentiment was mirrored throughout the analysis of social media covering the Japan events. Comments posted on the YouTube videos such as “Just proving..BAD THINGS DON’T HAPPEN AT DISNEY LOL!” (jtcent, 2011b, para. 28) and “still is the happiest place and probably the best place to be in an earthquake the magic of disney WILL protect

u...” (roaboll, 2011, para. 27). Comments like these appeared frequently below the videos, evidence of Tokyo Disney Resort’s successful response. Certain videos included actual words or notes of gratitude directed towards cast members and the Tokyo Disney Resort. Evidence of these beliefs were also found on Twitter. For example, David Landsel, a writer for the New York Post tweeted from the Tokyo Disney Resort “Nothing takes the sting off a severe rattling like the way staff at Tokyo Disney handle the whole thing #earthquake” and “Lasting impression from yesterday; Disney cast members running around apologizing for the earthquake, as it was happening. #IloveJapan” (Topsy.com, 2012a). All of these messages validate Disney’s credible image while continuing to foster a favorable halo effect for the organization.

Entertainment cast members also provide evidence of effective reputation management in that even after the Tokyo Disney Resort paid to send them back to America until the situation was under control in Japan, many returned to finish their contract (S.B. James, personal communication, January 31, 2012). As noted, several potential interviewees declined to speak with the researcher based upon their loyalty to the Tokyo Disney Resort. Those who broke their contract and chose not to return to Tokyo still speak positively of the organization and were happy to work at the Walt Disney World Resort. E-mails from the Walt Disney World Resort show that they were respectful of the cast member’s decision not to return to Tokyo and eager to find a place for them in Florida (S.G. John, personal communication, February 13, 2012).

## Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusions

Ultimately, this study provided clear answers to both research questions. The first, which asks how the Tokyo Disney Resort fostered sensemaking through instructing, adjusting and reputation management messages, can be answered by reflecting on the properties of sensemaking. By prompting action; recognizing that sensemaking is retrospective, social, continual and focused on plausibility rather than accuracy; encouraging capacity; and empowering employees, the Resort was able to successfully engage the sensemaking process. The second question, which discusses how the Tokyo Disney Resort utilized social media to deliver these messages to stakeholders following the crisis, demonstrates that the Company distributed messages of adjusting and reputation management through blogs and Twitter while proof of their instructional messages is evident on YouTube.

This study provides advancement in three areas of research: sensemaking, crisis communication and social media. Specifically, this discussion outlines the effective organizational communication displayed by the Tokyo Disney Resort in fostering successful sensemaking. Opportunities in the field of crisis communication regarding pre-planning and credibility are also examined. Finally, the use of social media in communicating Disney's response to the crisis is discussed.

### **Discussion**

**Sensemaking.** The sensemaking process is comprised of three core steps: enactment, selection and retention. Because “cognition lies in the path of action” (Weick, 1988, p. 307), one could argue that by providing immediate instruction to stakeholders, the Tokyo Disney Resort helped initiate the first step in sensemaking process. With a parkwide announcement

made only a little over a minute after the beginning of the quake and instruction from cast members being provided from the onset of the crisis, stakeholders were forced to immediately take action, beginning the first step of enactment.

Additionally, one property of sensemaking is that it is retrospective (Weick, 1995). This means that sensemaking should rely on previous experiences and while all guests may not have had previous experience in handling an earthquake, as those affected by the crisis look backward, they may be less likely to trust messages coming from a source deemed to be unethical or unreliable. The Tokyo Disney Resort was able to rely on a positive previously established reputation which could help foster sensemaking in stakeholders. Furthermore, their handling of previous crises (i.e. the September 11<sup>th</sup> terrorist attacks) demonstrates to stakeholders that the organization is also able to build upon previous experiences.

Another property of sensemaking is that it is a social, not an individualistic, process. Weick claims that “conduct is contingent on the conduct of others, whether those others are imagined or physically present” (Weick, 1995, p. 39). While obviously unable to account for the conduct of imagined individuals, Disney was able to aid in the social property of sensemaking by keeping everyone calm. Not only do videos demonstrate that people were seemingly peaceful throughout the ordeal but they followed the conduct outlined by cast members who were calm and deliberate while providing information and aid. Furthermore, by announcing information via the park-wide speaker system, the Tokyo Disney Resort embraced the social property of sensemaking by not communicating with only a few members of upper-level management or forcing guests to obtain information from outside sources.

In addition to openly communicating with all guests, the Tokyo Disney Resort embraced another property of sensemaking by continually providing messages to stakeholders. Because the sensemaking process is continual (Weick, 1995), it is important for organizations to continually provide information to stakeholders since an individual is always taking in new information to make sense of the situation.

Yet another property of sensemaking is that of plausibility rather than accuracy. Plausibility entails “pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention, and instrumentality” (Weick, 1995, p. 57). This becomes difficult with an event, like the occurrences of March 11, 2011, that are so tragic or large that they almost do not seem plausible. This may be combatable with accurate information in messages disseminated with quality in mind rather than speed. While messages of instruction were offered immediately, follow-up information was provided via the park-wide speaker system hours after the crisis began. This allowed the Tokyo Disney Resort to provide verifiably true information in a manner that seemed coherent and reasonable, thereby engaging the plausible aspect of sensemaking.

Furthermore, in order to achieve enacted sensemaking through capacity, which is the extent to which individuals feel capable of doing something about the crisis, Weick (1988) suggests that organizations should be made of “heterogeneous teams of diverse people with sufficient mutual respect that they maintain dense interaction with one another” (p. 313). This was evident in the YouTube video analysis when employees worked together, at times in unison, to figure out the situation and provide assistance. The videos show cast members communicating via walkie-talkies and working side-by-side to provide information and assistance to guests.

Another example of sensemaking found in this case study involves the dynamic of employee empowerment. Messages either before the crisis, during the crisis or a combination of both, led employees to feel empowered to take proactive and independent action. This is evident in the way they provided immediate messages of instruction to guests as well as their distribution of food, water, blankets and other merchandise. Many of the videos demonstrate employees acting without clear direction to do so. For example, video shows cast members removing parade ropes so guests could move to open areas and cast members giving away Duffy bears with no apparent instruction from upper-level management. This aligns with Weick's work which indicates that effective enacted sensemaking corresponds with instilling a sense of importance and responsibility in employees at all levels of management (Weick, 1988).

All of this information provided from the Tokyo Disney Resort through park-wide speaker announcements and cast members helped to nurture the sensemaking process for guests. As established, communication is crucial to the sensemaking process; particularly during a crisis. Since organizations can help engage the sensemaking process, they become ethically responsible to do so through efficient communication during a tragic event.

**Crisis Communication.** Effective crisis communication requires effective risk analysis and planning (Veil, Reynolds, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2008). The preparation of the Tokyo Disney Resort was evident in their management of the crisis in several aspects. First, the initial instructional message was pre-recorded. The Tokyo Disney Resort was aware of the risk for potential earthquakes and had not only seemingly trained employees for such an event, but also had pre-analyzed the messages they wished to communicate to stakeholders during the crisis and had prepared a message to go out to the public almost instantaneously.



Predetermined crisis communication practices are also evident in the clear-cut code of conduct established and utilized by all Walt Disney Parks and Resorts. By establishing predetermined operational guidelines (OLC Group, 2011d), the Tokyo Disney Resort was able to ensure not only standards by which to rely on for operational decisions, but they were also able to ensure their core values of safety, courtesy, show and efficiency were met. The first priority of safety was met with instructional messages and cast member actions which told guests to move away from buildings, cover their heads and wait for further information. The second organizational guideline of courtesy was met in that the Tokyo Disney Resort worked to treat all guests as VIPs, even in the face of a crisis, by providing sincere concern and hospitality through the provision of food and other items of comfort. The third guideline was met as cast members continually acted as if they were part of a show. This ranged from continually waving on parade route while the earthquake was happening to smiling at guests while providing instruction. Finally, the operational guideline of efficiency was found in their effective pre-planning, the speed with which they communicated and the ability of cast members to quickly provide information and supplies.

Other indicators of effective crisis communication are noted in the dissemination of the message in three different languages. While there may have been guests who did not speak one of the three chosen languages, Disney's focus on intercultural communication was evident and beneficial in order to reduce uncertainty. Employees who worked to communicate with English-speaking guests, like the one who talked about New York with visiting Americans (Landsel, 2011), helped to bridge the gap between cultural boundaries. Acknowledging and accounting for cultural differences by addressing under-represented populations at the Tokyo Disney Resort falls in line with best practices in risk and crisis

communication outlined by Sellnow and Vidoloff (2009). By understanding the diversity present in their community, Disney was able to create pre-recorded messages of instruction and deliver them in an appropriate manner.

Additionally, credibility during crises is demonstrated during the Tokyo Disney Resort's response to the tragedy. Given the fact that the Tokyo Disney Resort aligns heavily with American parks (Raz, 2000), and both American parks were established decades before the Japanese counterpart, the credibility found in the Tokyo Disney Resort could be a direct result of their actions or of the actions of their affiliated but separate organizations. This dynamic grows increasingly more interesting when looking at the fact that some messages came from the Disney Parks Blog rather than the owning OLC Group. This would indicate that the manner in which the American based companies handled previous crises affected the credibility associated with the Tokyo Disney Resort and the way people believed the resort would handle the crisis. Since credibility can be achieved through ongoing interaction with the public (Seeger, 2006) the way the Tokyo Disney Resort handled this crisis will surely affect their credibility in handling future crises.

Finally, this study revealed an interesting distinction in differentiating messages of adjusting from messages of reputation management. These messages may seemingly overlap in certain situations as some actions taken to ease psychological stress (i.e., providing blankets to guests) may also serve as actions of reputation management to bolster the organization's image. However, with the evidence provided from cast members, one possible distinction may be offered in order to identify true messages of adjusting. Because the Tokyo Disney Resort offered counseling services and links to credible sources to cast members, with no chance of outward recognition, these actions may be fully considered adjusting.

Since actions and messages that may receive publicity are hard to gauge for intent, messages of adjusting may be clearly identified when no reward from unintended recipients can occur.

**Role of Social Media.** Social media is becoming an ever-growing media channel through which crisis communicators can disseminate important messages. Additionally, social media serves as a mechanism for potential harm in that everyone who has access to social media can also choose to use it to supply false information and negative comments on an organization. Fortunately, due to the preparation of the Tokyo Disney Resort, social media was able to provide validation for the success of the efforts.

In particular, YouTube videos provided evidence of cast members' actions and information received by the Tokyo Disney Resort. The videos also revealed calm demeanors demonstrated by cast members in their actions to ensure the safety and comfort of all guests. All of this evidence is posted online, for millions to view the ethical actions taken by the company during a tragic crisis. However, had the Tokyo Disney Resort not been as prepared to respond to such a crisis, instead of bolstering their reputation, the video evidence may have been devastating.

As such, proactive use of social media is suggested for crisis managers. This means that ideal use of social media should be used "to both disseminate information and monitor public comments regarding their agency and/or community event" (Crowe, 2011, p. 416). While the Tokyo Disney Resort does not have a Twitter handle, other aspects of the Disney Company do. Messages tweeted from those handles actually linked stakeholders back to the Disney Parks Blog. This creates a unified crisis communication strategy by engaging various types of social media with one message. The messages were undoubtedly effective given the level of retweets for each message (a total of 173 retweets for the first message and a total of

74 retweets for the second message). Also, given the character constraints of tweeting, directing stakeholders to the blog allowed the company to provide more thorough coverage of the status of the park and their actions during the crisis.

Unfortunately, despite the unison with which the company apparently communicated through their Disney Parks, Disneyland Resort and Walt Disney World Twitter accounts, there appears to be some discrepancy in the communicative practices of the remaining ten Disney Twitter accounts. This discrepancy creates two possibilities – both of them problematic for the Disney Company. The first possible explanation is that the company simply chose not to communicate the same message through the other Disney Twitter accounts. If this were the case, this could decrease the organization's credibility by not being consistent in their messages. Moreover, the fact that one account, the Disney account, actually retweeted a RedCross Tweet discredits the Disney Company as an information provider. While the Red Cross is undoubtedly a reliable and necessary source during such an event and the connection demonstrates Disney was collaborating with credible sources, the retweet by the Disney account could give the impression that the Disney company was either unwilling or unable to communicate their own information.

The second possible solution is that the remaining Disney accounts, which, according to Twitter are verified, are actually not verified Disney sites. While the Twitter account is linked to the Disney Facebook page and various other seemingly legitimate sources, there is no official link to the Disney Company aside from the obvious name association and website links. If truly unofficial Disney accounts have somehow achieved verification, the potential reputational harm is astounding.

Interestingly, when combining the fields of social media and message construction, there were clear distinctions in the way specific elements of social media were used. For example, it appears that messages of instructing information were not disseminated by the Tokyo Disney Resort through a social media channel. While YouTube videos provided examples of instruction, the Resort did not distribute their own messages through this medium. And yet, while messages of instruction were ultimately absent from social media, messages of adjusting and reputation management seemed to intertwine between blogs and Twitter. The Disney Company announced the status of the parks and their monetary donations through the latter two social media channels.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The first limitation that affected the researcher's ability to conduct this study is simple: the researcher does not speak Japanese. This became problematic in a myriad of ways. First, this made searching the OLC Group website, along with the Tokyo Disney Resort website, somewhat problematic. While both websites have an English version, not everything appeared to carry over. Furthermore, some text in pdf's or on documents remained in Japanese, thereby hindering the ability of the researcher to fully understand it. Furthermore, while coding the YouTube videos, the researcher had to rely on nonverbal communication to analyze message content for videos that were recorded by non-English speaking Tokyo Disney Resort guests.

Another limitation to this study is that of culture. Because the researcher is not a member of the Japanese culture, it is difficult to make assumptions about cultural dissimilarities that may occur during a crisis such as reliance on previous experiences or accepted crisis reactions. For example, when cast members immediately provided

instructions to guests to cover their heads, it is difficult to know whether that information stems from the fact that Japan has experienced earthquakes before, therefore resulting in previous experience in such a crisis, or whether they were providing information based upon training to do so. Furthermore, this study did not specifically examine the role of the Disney culture in the sensemaking process. While a background of the Disney culture was included for case context, this study did not assess how an individual's identification with the Disney culture may have influenced their sensemaking process.

Future research could examine how language and the multiple layers of cultural identification affect sensemaking and adherence to crisis communication. Future research should also include how the Disney culture is perpetuated through employees and cast members. Internal documents should be examined to establish the training of employees in emergency response and to identify any pre-determined protocol for earthquake devastation. Additionally, future research should include more correspondence with cast members and guests to solidify the effectiveness of Tokyo Disney Resort's response to the crisis. This study established the effectiveness of Tokyo Disney's message construction, however, these messages are insignificant if not received effectively. The only way to prove the messages distributed by the Tokyo Disney Resort during the crisis aided in the sensemaking of stakeholders is to receive confirmation from those stakeholders.

Another aspect of future research should focus on the use of social media in distributing crisis communication messages. While social media may undoubtedly be a useful tool in crises, future research should focus on the different types of social media and their effectiveness to distribute each of the three levels of message content: instructing, adjusting and reputation management.

## **Conclusion**

Weick explains that “actions devoted to sensemaking play a central role in the genesis of crises and therefore need to be understood if we are to manage and prevent crises” (Weick, 1988, p. 308). Given the potential for a plethora of negative and harmful outcomes, effective crisis communication is essential. Specifically, achieving effective organizational communication during a crisis is paramount to ensuring the safety of individuals and organizations through the fostering of productive sensemaking.

Cascading crises create particularly complex situations for crisis communication because the risks are always changing and increasing. Thus, the burden to communicate effectively becomes amplified and organizations faced with the need to disseminate information in these events must work quickly to ensure safety and image maintenance. While not easy, efficient pre-planning and established knowledge about possible risks can help to ensure the success of an organization and its stakeholders.

Incorporating social media into crisis planning and response can assist in the increasing the speed of message dissemination. As a tool for crisis communication practice, social media can be utilized to provide information quickly, conveniently and consistently to organizational members and the public. In addition, as a research tool, social media provides direct access inside a crisis situation as it unfolds. The use of YouTube in this study enabled the researcher to obtain accurate, first-hand accounts of the crisis without relying on individual memories or secondary sources. This allowed the researcher to witness the immediate organizational response and enacted sensemaking as it was occurring. Understanding how social media can be used by the organization, and also by patrons of the organization to follow the crisis response, is crucial to organizational success in such a crisis.

Tokyo Disney Resort was prepared to foster the sensemaking process during the earthquake/tsunami/nuclear crisis in March of 2011. The resort had messages of instruction prepared and ready to broadcast and followed the instruction with messages of adjusting information through traditional and social media channels. Additionally, through ethical behavior and appropriate reputation management strategies, the resort was able to boost its credibility and retain its coveted image as one of the most magical places on earth.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Japan Media Coverage Survey

1. This coverage takes place at/discusses
  - a. Tokyo Disneyland
  - b. Tokyo DisneySea
  - c. Tokyo Disney Hotel
  - d. Unknown
  - e. Other
  
2. This coverage address the
  - a. Earthquake
  - b. Tsunami
  - c. Nuclear Crisis
  - d. All of the above
  
3. Was instruction provided during the news coverage?
  - a. Disney Company
  - b. Disney employees
  - c. Fellow guest
  - d. Anchor
  - e. Not sure (language)
  - f. None
  
4. What specific instructions were provided?
  
5. Were specific food/water concerns addressed?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  
6. Was any person/organization cited during the coverage?
  - a. List.
  - b. No
  
7. Are future plans discussed in the coverage? (release of guests, reopening date, etc.)
  - a. List details.
  - b. No
  
8. Is there any image restoration taking place?
  - a. List by whom.
  - b. None

9. What image restoration strategies are being utilized?
  - a. Simple
  - b. Shift Blame
  - c. Provocation
  - d. Defeasibility
  - e. Accident
  - f. Good intention
  - g. Bolstering
  - h. Ingratiation
  - i. Minimizing
  - j. Differentiation
  - k. Transcendence
  - l. Attack Accuser
  - m. Compensation
  - n. Mortification
  - o. Recompense/Corrective Action
  
10. The overall theme of the media was
  - a. Panicked
  - b. Confused
  - c. Calm

## Vita

HOLLY ROBERTS  
DEFENSE DATE: APRIL 16, 2012  
BIRTHPLACE: RALEIGH, NORTH CAROLINA

### EDUCATION

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University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma – 2008  
*BA in Journalism – Major: Public Relations*

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

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#### **Research Assistant**

August 2010-Present, National Center for Food Protection and Defense, Lexington, KY

#### **Cast Member**

January 2006-Present, The Walt Disney Company, Orlando, FL

#### **Marketing Assistant**

May 2008-November 2009, Independent Bank Group, McKinney, TX

#### **Intern**

January 2008-May 2008, Susan G. Komen for the Cure, Norman, OK

#### **Intern**

May 2007-October 2007, Frontier City Amusement Park, Oklahoma City, OK

### AWARDS AND HONORS

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#### *University of Oklahoma*

- Dorothy Braly Scholarship Recipient – 2008
- Gaylord Ambassador – 2007 to 2008
- Gamma Beta Phi Honor Society Member
- President's Honor Roll – Spring 2008
- OHLAP Scholarship Recipient – 2003-2008
- Dean's Honor Roll – Fall 2005
- Dean's Honor Roll – Fall 2003

#### *University of Kentucky*

- Research Fellow Candidate – 2011 to Present
- Risk Science Fellow – 2011
- Teaching Assistant – 2010 to Present
- Research Assistant – 2010 to Present
- Graduate Symposium Top Panel Paper Award

#### *Professional*

Guest Fanatic Card Recipient (7) – 2006-2012 – Walt Disney World Resort, Orlando, FL