Full Length Article

Preventing damage: The psychology of crisis communication buffers in organized sports

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Sports crisis communication is a growing field of study, with research focusing on the image repair of athletes and teams, fan solidarity during crises, and the role of mass and new media in crisis development. However, reflecting a broader tendency in crisis communication to emphasize the study of response strategies at the expense of other factors, sports crisis communication research has not examined the unique factors in sports that prevent crises from causing severe image and reputation damage. In this paper, we apply Coombs' notion of buffers to argue for new attention to two particularly important buffers in sports: communities and political economy. These buffers often preclude the need for any response at all, and crisis communication practitioners would do well to implement them around their own sports teams to prevent damage from crises.

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1. Introduction

A growing area of public relations and crisis communication research examines organized collegiate and professional sports. Predominant in this research are studies of the image repair of athletes and teams, fan solidarity during crises, and the role of mass and new media in crisis development (Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Blaney, Lippert, & Smith, 2012; Brazeal, 2008; Brown, 2016; Brown & Billings, 2013; Brown, Brown, & Billings, 2013; Compton & Compton, 2014).

Factors unique to the field complicate crisis communication in organized sports. Unlike retail customers in a simple relationship with a store, sports fans buy tickets to gain access to an exciting public drama—a drama not found with most other products or services. Sports fans are engaged daily in on- and off-line communities around sports, and sports leagues often have a monopoly in these communities. The many prominent actors involved—from owners to coaches to players—further complicate the sports crisis communication analysis (it is rare in the business world to have groups of employees who are public stars, for example). The level of engagement fans have with these actors means that sports crises have the potential to strike deeply at the heart of the relationship between fans, teams, and players.

An assumption in the study of crisis communication generally and sports crisis communication specifically is that without effective strategic communication during the response stage, a crisis will cause immediate and serious damage to the reputations and images of the individuals and organizations involved. In the case of sports teams, the connection between

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the fan and team could be irreparably harmed. This assumption underlies a major vein of crisis communication research that tests response strategies such as denial, apology, and corrective action to find the best ones for each specific crisis situation or type of crisis (Coombs, 2004; p. 270). Applied to sports, these tests and case studies have praised apology as an important damage-limiting strategy (Brazeal, 2008; Brown, 2016).

A subset of this research—found in Situational Crisis Communication Theory and of particular importance to this paper—takes a step back from focusing on which strategy to choose and considers what pre-existing factors could influence the management of a crisis. Coombs calls these pre-existing conditions "buffers." As the name implies, a buffer may come between the crisis and the team's or athlete's reputation and image, limiting damage. Coombs primarily describes two buffers: crisis history and a favourable reputation with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007; p. 165; Coombs, 2014; p. 154).

An organization with no crisis history faces less attribution of blame from stakeholders during a crisis, limiting the image or reputation damage of a single crisis. If the crisis represents a pattern, attributions of blame increase, damaging the public image and alienating stakeholders. The second buffer, a favourable reputation, develops "by meeting and exceeding stakeholder expectations" (Coombs, 2014; p. 35). A favourable reputation already in place at the time of a crisis can be a "buffer against the reputational capital lost during a crisis" (Coombs, 2007; p. 165). For Coombs, this buffer prevents stakeholders who already think highly of the organization from assuming the worst when a crisis occurs (2014; p. 154). They may even attack the source of the crisis message, such as an accuser or whistleblower, in a form of solidarity with the organization or the individuals within it.

As with Coombs' two types, the concept of a buffer represents any factor that comes between an organization and its stakeholders in times of crises—a mediator of sorts. It is a useful idea for crisis communication researchers because it necessarily complicates the process of selecting a crisis communication response strategy, whether responding in the fields of business, politics, or sports. Without giving thought to buffers, crisis response strategy theory risks becoming a rote act of moving directly to response decisions. However, not all crises have a clear chain of causality among events, not all will cause damage, and not all require immediate or extensive response strategies. All of these factors may vary due to the protective effect of buffers.

Buffers have not been given much consideration, however, in research on sports public relations, a point exemplified by the two most significant sports public relations textbooks in print today. In *Sports Public Relations: Managing Stakeholder Communication*, Stoldt, Dittmore, and Branvold (2012) present a broad look at the field, with a chapter on sports crisis communication. In the book, they do touch on community relations and note that stakeholder relationships should be "nurtured" (p. 30). The act of community relations, they note, is about "establishing and enhancing relationships with various publics" (p. 218). Nonetheless, there is no connection in the book between these goals and crisis communication. In the textbook *Sports Public Relations*, L'Etang touches on crisis communication. The book does consider a community perspective through social construction/cultural studies theories. As well, it discusses crises as damaging to athletes' and teams' reputations. It even hints at buffers when relating a story about the fan following of Manchester United football star Wayne Rooney. L'Etang writes that "outstanding sports stars may accrue at least some immunity" from reputation damage thanks to fan community support, although she does not expand on this or develop any theory (2013, p. 29). Both books, which mostly consider crisis communication from the perspective of the response stage, need more attention to the theory of crisis buffers.

With that in mind, we argue that sports crisis communicators must consider what comes between the crisis and its effects on stakeholders (clients, customers, citizens, fans) and the organization (owners, coaches, players), which is valuable information for planning and prevention, as well as response. This paper's theoretical analysis expands upon this notion of the buffer for the first time in sports crisis communication literature to provide a foundation for quantitative work. Sports crisis communication researchers have not attended to buffers despite organized sports being particularly instructive to understanding how damage to images and reputations is avoided. In addition to the buffers of crisis history and favourable relationships, we explain two more: sports fan communities and political economy. Yet these buffers are not exclusive to organized sports—crisis communicators may find them useful to consider in business and political crises as a way of understanding the potential damage a crisis may cause, the best approaches to respond to a given crisis, and the steps to prevent crises.

A problem of studying the damage of crises in organized sports is that rarely do events and actions in this realm lead to serious damage, such as in the kind of crisis that is a "major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry or stakeholders" (Coombs, 1999; p. 2). While crises are described as "events that threaten the image of an organization" (Coombs, 1995; p. 448), few crises in sports deal enough damage to images to reach the level of a significant threat to ticket or merchandise sales or brand images. Furthermore, Taylor and Perry (2005) describe a crisis as a "significant disruption to a business, social environment or an organization" (p. 211). However, few crises in organized sports lead to disruptions such as a shutdown of the team or an end of a coaching or playing career because of the buffers described in this paper.

Our argument is one of degree; yet this argument should not be taken to mean that sports crises are inherently less significant than crises in other fields. Indeed, those involved in organized sports face crises that would be debilitating in any other industry: mutinies of employees against leadership, the regular firing of managers to start fresh, the relocation of operations, offensive public comments from employees and managers directed to hundreds of thousands of customers. Most businesses and political bodies are not quite so public or connected with customers and stakeholders on a daily basis, resulting in many of these problems being kept in-house. Thus, while this relative privacy during crises may be perceived

as more likely to create a more favourable outcome for organizations in other fields, the reality is that most teams and athletes—not corporations or politicians—tend to survive crises relatively unscathed.

By many accounts, a major crisis in organized sports is the losing season—winning being teams' *raison d'être*. Football coach Vince Lombardi famously said "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing" (Kruse, 1981, p. 273). "Everyone involved," Kruse writes, "must make every effort to win at all times" (p. 274). Compton and Compton state that a losing or poor season counts as a crisis and that a team's win-loss record is directly linked to its image—losing can bring financial difficulties, trouble recruiting players and coaches, decreased player morale, and lowered attendance (2014, p. 346). Additionally, some researchers suggest that beyond the crisis response, winning is what most affects continued fan support and media attention (Utsler & Epp, 2013; p. 159). Yet curiously, a losing season does not completely stop fans from attending events or expressing their support in the cases of many popular sports organizations. Why is this so?

This avoidance of damage becomes evident upon a brief overview of teams that face losing seasons for many years but remain operational, only intermittently substituting coaches and players, all while maintaining a strong and dedicated fan base. In other words, professional leagues and university and college teams these days almost never die. Players who offend or cause dissension move to other teams. The start of every new season brings a fresh perspective from fans that seems to deny or overlook crisis history—images are renewed or reset regularly.

In this paper, we describe this unique nature of crises in organized sports, arguing that buffers of community and political economy likely come in the way of serious image and reputational damage that would end the operations of businesses in many other fields. These buffers work to prevent a significant disruption of the relationship between organizations and stakeholders and reduce the risk of image damage for sporting organizations and athletes. These buffers may also provide a lesson for crisis communicators in other fields on limiting damage from crises.

2. The bonds of community

Related to the idea of favourable relationship history is the greater buffering effect of community. Speaking of crisis communication generally, Kent (2012) wonders "how important the relationship between an organization and its publics is to weather crises" (p. 709). The relationship in Kent's formulation is between groups of people ("publics") and an organization, not simply atomized individuals to an organization.

In organized sports, a strong bond between the team and the fans—and among the fans themselves—develops from communal spectatorship and indentification. Fans often watch with friends and family and socialize before and after games (in the United States, tailgating is a common pre-game tradition in which people congregate beside cars in parking lots, eating and drinking). Gantz (2013) argues that sports are more than just entertainment and they bring people together (unlike other forms of entertainment) because they are best watched live, are largely appropriate for all audiences, and provide all of the excitement of victories, battles, and defeats in a noncontroversial way. Spectatorship is shared, bringing people into groups and promoting feelings of community and mutual interests (Gantz, 2013). The family metaphor goes even further. Kruse (1981) argues that "the entire organization that supports a team is, for the fans, an extended 'family' in which they, too, participate. What affects one member of the team affects all" (p. 272).

This is radically different from the typical singular relationship between a customer and an organization offering straightforward products or services. We do not typically buy products and services in the company of large groups (modern online shopping is even more solitary). This reality isolates the organization–customer relationship and, effectively, precludes it from gaining the same level of importance and engagement in stakeholders' lives as the relationship between organized sports and their supporters. Understanding the difference between these two relationships can be achieved through examining the reasons behind fans' support.

One study found three factors behind people's support for a team: success of the team, geographical concerns, and the levels of support offered to the team by friends and family (Wann, Tucker, & Schrader, 1996; p. 1000). These three factors can all be reframed as potential buffers to crisis damage.

Especially in the context of shared support for a team, it is important to note that the connections of sports spectatorship may extend beyond the friendship or familial group to the greater civic community. Beyond the family unit, for example, sports bars serve as rallying points for entire communities that "provide an opportunity for fans to share, affirm, and legitimize their fanship" (Gantz, 2013). As Gantz writes, "sports is important because it has the potential to capture and captivate the attention of the world and serve as a common bond, binding people together across gender, race, religious, and political divides" (2013, p. 177). This publicness allows individuals who may not otherwise have firm ties to other groups or communities, which help them define their own identity, to feel not only connected but also important. The importance of our human need to belong can hardly be overstated in terms of guiding our behaviours, allegiances, and beliefs.

While not explicitly positioning communities as crisis buffers, research into sports crisis communication has shown such fan communities in action during crises, coming to the rescue of favoured coaches, players, and teams. In 2011, Yahoo! Sports accused University of Miami supporter Nevin Shapiro of giving illegal benefits to 72 college athletes. This is a serious infraction under the U.S. National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) guidelines, with many other universities having been penalized for similar transgressions (Brown & Billings, 2013; p. 74). Yet in this situation, fans turned to Twitter to support the Miami Hurricanes team, themselves using crisis communication strategies to help the image of their team (2013, p. 75). Similarly, Penn State fans strongly supported college football coach Joe Paterno during the crisis surrounding Jerry Sandusky, a football coach who abused children during his time on Paterno's coaching staff (Brown et al., 2013). Joe

Paterno was a long-term, highly successful college football coach with a rabid following and fans expressed outrage when he was eventually fired for apparently overlooking allegations of abuse against Sandusky.

This type of allegiance can be directed toward athletes, coaches, or teams. Lewis found two types of allegiance to teams, in particular: civic allegiance entailed loyalty to the city over the team and symbolic allegiance entailed loyalty to the team over the city (cited in Foster & Hyatt, 2007; pp. 196–197). These are strong bonds tied to geography—with threats to the team conceivably also being interpreted as threats to the city in the minds of supporters. For teams with a monopoly in a geographic community, fans may be more inclined to identify with the team as they have no other choice.

The power of the civic connection is particularly evident in the 2014 crisis over the sale and possible relocation of the National Football League's (NFL) Buffalo Bills. At the time, a number of high profile investors looked at purchasing the team from the estate of Ralph Wilson. Buffalonians became angry when it seemed that one potential buyer, rock singer Jon Bon Jovi, would move the Bills to nearby Toronto, where the team had previously played a few games. Buffalonians protested this possibility because the team was more than just a business to them—it was a cornerstone of their personal and civic identities. The loss of the team would have left Buffalo without high-level football, likely forever. Finally, white-knight-billionaire Terry Pagula came to the rescue, purchased the team, and kept it in Buffalo, resolving a major crisis in this sports community. While the specific role of fan protest cannot be quantified in this instance, it nevertheless likely contributed to Pagula's decision to keep the team in its original location.

The strength of these communal bonds in relation to sports teams is explained by the psychology of identification. Fan identification is the idea that fans have strong personal and emotional ties to sports teams, even defining their own identities in part based on their fandom (Brown, Dickhaus, & Long, 2012; p. 157; Laverie & Arnett, 2000; p. 230). Fans enjoy being spectators, so they become loyal to their teams and join with others who exhibit the same loyalties; these ties, in turn, help fans define their own identities (Laverie & Arnett, 2000; p. 226). Speaking more generally, Foster and Hyatt (2007) note that people's identities are developed through not only the connection to some organizations or teams but also through disconnection from other organizations (pp. 189–199). These processes create psychological positive feedback loops, with fans supporting their own team and disliking other teams more and more strongly, while at the same time solidifying their internal beliefs about the importance of maintaining and demonstrating these convictions.

Satisfaction is also strongly tied to fandom and prolonged support. Specific instances of situational involvement tend to create strong, positive affective states, increasing overall satisfaction (Laverie & Arnett, 2000; p. 232). Pritchard, Stinson, and Patton say identification has two parts. One is affinity, which encompasses the closeness between a team's image and a fan's self-image. The second is affiliation, which underlies a fan's desire to be a part of a group of like-minded individuals. Together, affinity and affiliation work to form identification (Pritchard, Stinson, & Patton, 2010; pp. 69–71). Similarly, the connection between the team image and the fan image are key for fan identification, and fan identification is key for team success (2010), connecting identity to financial success.

One caveat to the power of this identification is that Sutton and colleagues (Sutton, McDonald, Milne, & Cimperman, 1997) found that people's identification with a team varied based on the factors of satisfaction, reputation, frequency of fan involvement and interaction with the team, as well as visibility of the fan-team relationship. Furthermore, the buffer of community through identification is not absolute—it has varying levels. Sutton and colleagues (1997) note that not all fans are equally attached. Some fans are very committed for a long period but are not heavily emotionally involved. In their study, Sutton and colleagues showed that some fans were more connected based on recent team performances, and their identification also depended upon how much time and money they put into their fan community.

A buffer of community based on this psychological and communicative foundation seems to surround many established teams, protecting against damage from underperformance (which is analogous to product failures or poor service in other industries). For example, attendance at Wrigley Field for the Chicago Cubs Major League Baseball team stayed high for 107 years despite 49 losing seasons in that time and only a handful of division titles (the team finally won the World Series in 2016). The Toronto Maple Leafs have not won the National Hockey League (NHL) Stanley Cup since 1967, with 22 losing seasons in that time (including a recent run of seven years without making the playoffs). This has led to the regular firing of coaches and the trading of players. Yet tickets remain in demand and the team is not in any danger of being dismantled or relocating. Fans hope for better. New teams dream of this kind of fandom—they do not have the benefit of community support and struggle to remain afloat during crises. As such, losing may create a greater crisis for new teams than for established ones.

Recently, sports public relations professionals have begun to encourage fan communities through mass and social media as a marketing and public relations technique. This work connects all stakeholders, including fans, management, and athletes (Hopwood 2007a, 2007b; Hopwood, Skinner, & Kitchin, 2010; Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001). Athletes use Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to communicate directly with fans, developing large and supportive followings. Teams and athletes work together in a process of "nation building." This is not a new process—forms of media, particularly print media, have always played a role in nation-building and imagined communities, a process that develops political solidarity (Anderson, 1991). Two examples stand out: the Boston Red Sox baseball club calls its fan club Red Sox Nation (Red Sox Nation Details, n.d.), while the Toronto Maple Leafs encourage fans to join a similar fan club—with benefits—called Leafs Nation (Leafs Nation, n.d.). The Twitter hashtags #redsoxnation and #leafsnation are popular during the baseball and hockey seasons. Fans can join conversations with thousands of others, reflecting on the games as they happen. These hashtags reflect interest but also likely create it, drawing new fans into the fold.

Many sporting events—such as the Olympics—are also played up as major community and cultural spectacles. The Olympics are an emotional event that has even been called a "civil religion" (Rothenbuhler, 1989; p. 142), a term coined by Rousseau and defined as the inherently nationalistic moral foundation of society that holds its members together (Xifra, 2008; p. 193). Xifra considers the community of Barcelona Football Club fans in this light. There are many rituals associated with the club, which members take part in on a regular basis, in an almost cult-like execution (2008, p. 195). Fans meet other fans, produce banners, develop chants, and so on. Xifra argues that the Barcelona Football Club is more than just a team—it is a civil religion that boasts a bigger budget and following than any other sports organization (2008, pp. 192–193). In the case of Barcelona, one could say that the buffer of community is taken to the extreme. Though Xifra does not tackle the question of what could conceivably damage the team's image in a crisis, it is clear from the description of people's devotion to the club that most crises would be transcended. It is quite possible, however, that with such devotion to the organization, transgressions by individual players may instead be vilified, which once more exemplifies the subtle nuances that affect the scope of fan loyalties, ranging from specific athletes to national pride.

Studies of identification and community bonds in organized sports show the power of this buffer. Sutton and colleagues note that wins and losses become less damaging as "fan identification . . . may minimize the effects of team performance on long-term fiscal success and position" (Sutton et al., 1997; p. 15). Pritchard et al. (2010) suggest that factors such as how much teams try to connect with and unite fans may influence fans' devotion. Identification with teams and players can create a sense of community and potentially lead to forgiveness in times of crisis (Sanderson & Emmons, 2014; pp. 27–31). Fans may also remain loyal to the team without risk of shifting their support to other competitors (Harada & Matsuoka, 1999), as well as commit for longer times, which can serve as a further protective effect (McDonald & Milne, 1997). Funk and Pritchard (2006) also note that these bonds make fans less likely to take negative press to heart, a recognition of the power of friendly audiences to make their own meanings of a crisis. Pritchard and colleagues even go so far as to argue that North American organized sports should build stronger ties by using European "club models," sponsoring youth events, and generally focusing on engaging instead of simply entertaining fans (2010; p. 75). Lacking a long history, Major League Soccer in the U.S. has recently attempted this process by encouraging youth academies and supporters' groups.

Fans' levels of involvement in a team have been shown to influence their reactions to crises (Doyle, Pentecost, & Funk, 2014; p. 314). For example, in a study of the crisis surrounding the National Basketball Association star Lebron James' announcement of his leaving the Miami Heat, higher fan involvement was linked with higher ratings of LeBron's image after the crisis, suggesting that dedicated supporters are not as swayed by crises as occasional fans are (Brown et al., 2012; p. 166). The analysis by Doyle and colleagues found that familiarity, involvement, and fit between an athlete's perceived image and a fan's self-concept served to "temper the impact of negative celebrity endorser publicity on attitudes to both the event and the sponsor brand" (p. 318). This makes it clear that buffers affect the outcomes of crises, and while Doyle's research involved sports endorsements, it can be extrapolated to fan loyalties toward sports teams and individual athletes.

At the same time, the buffer of community is similar to the "halo effect" that Coombs calls the "deflective power of a favourable relationship history" (Coombs & Holladay, 2001; p. 324). It has been long known in public relations research that a good relationship history creates a protective effect that causes some stakeholders to disregard the negativity of a crisis and side with the organization. The opposite relationship—a dislike for the organization—causes stakeholders to speak more fervently against it, particularly discounting its communication attempts during crises (Coombs, 1999a). In discussing celebrity, Benoit mentions a similar idea in passing—he suggests that the celebrity-fan relationship may reduce crisis image damage (1997; p. 262).

We want to, however, transcend the linear notion of the "relationship" here. This effect is more than simply relationship history because it goes beyond the customer-client relationship to include others. Without a community connection, fans of organized sports become simply customers purchasing a product. If this were true, then fans could more easily end the relationship with their team after a crisis by no longer purchasing tickets and turning to another team that could offer a better 'product'. Instead, we want to emphasize the overlapping bonds of sports communities and the strength of these bonds in keeping fans loyal to their teams and fellow supporters. A good metaphor for this idea is the spokes of a bicycle. The team resides in the middle circle of the bicycle wheel, and the spokes represent overlapping relationships among fans. In this way, fans are not conceived as atomized individuals linked only to their team; instead, all communities also see lateral connections between individuals and groups. The strength of the spokes in the wheel—a product of face-to-face and mediated communicative relationships and psychological identification—seems to protect the team in the middle.

In this conception, crises cannot damage images and disconnect fans from their teams quite as easily as in other industries because fans have much more to lose than just a product. Giving up on a team in crisis means giving up on the entire community, long-created and nurtured with friends and family in public and private spaces. These bonds are created at fan-centered events, at tailgates, in the stands, and on road trips. In a strong sporting community, fans cannot easily sever relationships with other fans for risk of being left behind by their fellow supporters. An issue with a team, therefore, must be severe enough to break two communicative bonds: the bond between a team and a fan and the bond between a fan and his or her compatriots. Most sporting crises never reach such significant threat levels. The retention of fans of established sports teams in the face of the team's failure—surely a crisis considering that the main goal for teams is to win—exemplifies the strength of the buffer of community.

3. Political economy

An issue mentioned earlier in this paper was that of monopolies, which brings political economy into the sports crisis buffer discussion. In most crisis communication case studies, customers have the choice to turn elsewhere for goods and services, making effective crisis response important to ensuring customers remain loyal. Great risk faces organizations that exist in competitive marketplaces. Maple Leaf Foods' response to its listeriosis crisis helped return it to a Canadian market leader and trusted source of meat products not long after the deaths of customers who had consumed its products (Greenberg & Elliott, 2009). Maple Leaf Foods faced a more competitive market of other producers, and its name could have been shunned by grocery store consumers. However, where sports teams have monopolies and face crises, fans have no choice if they want to turn to another top-level professional team to support. In Toronto, Maple Leafs fans could turn to the American Hockey League's Marlies, a second division team, but the Marlies are owned by the Maple Leafs. Thus, the team has cornered the market on professional hockey in the largest city in Canada. Fans can rant and rave about the Leafs' performance as much as they want, but in monopolized markets the only choice is to not buy tickets or to watch other teams on television, a sort of 'virtual' form of support that is quite far removed from the thrill of attending a live game and cheering along with thousands of other like-minded fans.

This idea is relevant to other industries as well. Consider the current near-monopoly that exists in the Canadian phone, cable, and Internet industry. Only a few major corporations—Telus, Rogers, and Bell—dominate the market, leaving customers with few options to turn to for services if they are not happy. And they are dissatisfied: a simple Google search reveals Twitter accounts and Facebook pages with thousands of complaints. Yet despite the slew of complaints, customers' only choice is to turn to another big company that likely has the same pricing, service quality, and customer service issues.

An analogous situation to the monopolies some sports teams hold is in the retail industry, with the example of Wal-Mart. Wal-Mart's crises have included unionization drives, the closing of stores, and allegations of anticompetitive business practices that force out smaller stores. Yet the corporation has continued to thrive and expand as a result of monopolizing many supplier markets and adhering to business practices that create the lowest retail prices. As a result, a person in a town monopolized by Wal-Mart may have little choice but to shop there. Global corporations like Nike, Reebok, and even Apple have also faced ethical crises in their production operations. All have been reported to use sweatshop labour and treat employees inhumanely (Apple's Chinese factory workers were found to be committing suicide due to the factory conditions and lifestyle). This news, however, while certainly having the appearance of a severe public relations crisis, did not seem to reduce sales. Another example is in the oil business. Gasoline and diesel fuel are vital for almost everyone—even if some people do not own cars, they likely depend on a bus for commuting to work, trucks and trains for delivering their food, and cargo ships for bringing over everything from toys to building materials. Fuel is a generic commodity in a near-monopoly market position. People can avoid buying a type of baby crib that faces a recall after child deaths, but they may not be able to avoid the gas station, directly or indirectly (occassional boycotts, such as those of Esso/ExxonMobile in the early 2000s, did turn some consumers to other fuel suppliers for a short time). As a result, crises pertaining to even the most catastrophic oil spills, concerns over pipeline placement, or oil extraction techniques have had little direct impact on consumers' fuel purchasing habits.

The concept of the political economy buffer fits with niche width theory (Hannan & Freeman, 1993; pp. 310–328), which suggests that a large organization may be given more leeway in assessments of its crisis response. Participants in one study suggested that the size of the industry—in the case of organized sports, the distinction may lie between professional and college levels—played a role in the perceived severity of crises as it resulted in different levels of media coverage and it essentially differentiated between amateurs and people who made their living in the field (Hughes & Shank, 2005; p. 213). Niche width theory researchers argue that audiences see large organizations differently than small ones, which can dramatically alter crisis outcomes. Conversely, the political economic perspective sees audience opinions as almost inconsequential. What needs more consideration in the study of possible damage to large organizations in crises—like professional sports teams—is not the idea that they are "too big to fail" (a factor of size) but that they hold a dominant market position that buffers them against the consequences of a crisis (a factor of competition). In other words, in sports, crisis becomes almost immaterial to the operations of some organizations since no alternatives exist for fans to exact economic damage on the organization. Instead, fan anger becomes merely symbolic.

Many organized sports associations set up a buffer to crisis damage in the way they organize and control leagues. Some leagues are set up as open systems while others are set up as closed systems, which has consequences for levels of crisis damage. For example, European football (or soccer, as it is commonly called in the U.S. and Canada) tends to favour open league systems with promotion and relegation—teams that perform poorly may be sent down to a lower league, with the consequences usually being reduced ticket sales and media attention and revenue. Teams encountering crises under this type of system may be forced to eliminate big contracts and fire coaches, ultimately losing fans. Fans who dislike their local team may start a new club and work their way up the pyramid of leagues. A famous example in England saw a segment of Manchester United fans who disliked the takeover of their team by American billionaire Malcom Glazer, which had resulted in ticket price increases, form a team called FC United of Manchester. This team was created in a low division of the English football pyramid, which allowed fans to enjoy football spectatorship without being chained to a dominant local club. Even the danger of relegation and competition in the European football pyramid system can be overcome with a strong community. In 2012, Rangers football club of Glasgow, Scotland, went bankrupt. The new Rangers corporation was consequently not

allowed to return to the Scottish Premier League but was relegated to the fourth tier of the Scottish football pyramid. Nonetheless, attendance has remained relatively similar to pre-2012 numbers as fans have not given up their support.

In contrast, most North American leagues tend to operate under a policy of closed memberships, meaning that teams have no threat of relegation. Indeed, many leagues' status as monopolies is so evident that their structure is occasionally challenged under anti-competition laws. These leagues cap player salaries and many share revenues between teams. As an example, Major League Soccer exists as a single entity, with teams acting as divisions of a larger corporation. This structure reduces competitive risk and, in turn, team crises, since parity reigns. Is a losing season then a significant crisis in North American professional sports? Not likely. And as is the case with teams like the Cleveland Indians and the Toronto Maple Leafs, fans intuitively know this to be true: the opening of the next season provides hope for better prospects. The new season seems to create a new image.

This by no means makes North American teams immune to crisis damage. Long-term losing can turn fans off, affecting a team's bottom line. Significant revenue losses can lead to relocation of the franchise—with some cities even funding new stadiums specifically to lure teams from other cities. The Vancouver Grizzlies (NBA), Atlanta Thrashers (NHL), and Chivas USA (MLS) have been relocated or eliminated after having faced crises of their own (poor seasons, incompetent management, and low attendances, respectively). Consider established franchises: the Toronto Maple Leafs, the Boston Celtics, or any major college team in a small city—ingrained in their cities' sporting cultures—do not suffer irreparably if they do not make the playoffs, if they employ controversial players, or if they engage poorly with fans. They have strong, long-term fan communities to support them, but they also have dominant market positions that ensure fans return regardless of performance, providing a buffer that maintains steady revenue streams over decades no matter what win-loss record. In the Maple Leafs' case, they still have the highest ticket prices in the NHL despite rarely making the playoffs in recent times (Pelley, 2014).

4. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to shine a theoretical light on the concept of the buffer in sports crisis communication, but also to expand on it in a conceptual way useful for crisis communication generally and sports crisis communication specifically. This conceptual approach is naturally limited to description; further quantitative research into the variations in buffers and the situations in which they work and do not work would be helpful. Nonetheless, determining what "comes between" the crisis and its image or reputational damage is important to crisis response theory, as it helps contextualize strategy. Before choosing a strategy, professional crisis communicators in sports and other fields must consider the community and political-economic factors that may help the organization and its athletes.

This approach requires taking a step back from the dominant focus in sports crisis communication on image repair and the crisis response stage, with an awareness that buffers are helpful for planning to avoid crises and their inherent damage in the first place. As buffers cannot be created "in the moment" of the response stage, they must be attended to well in advance. One must develop positive relationships with stakeholders before a crisis rather than simply wait for a crisis to occur and then respond. Nonetheless, buffers should not be seen as helpful for avoiding the consequences of crisis—that is a cynical attitude—but as a sign that community building can help prevent their development.

This is a particularly useful concept for new teams without a long-standing following, but also for established teams looking to maintain support. Public relations professionals should attend to seeing fans as members of communities in relationships with each other, not simply as customers in a business transaction. These relationships may occur completely outside the arena or stadium, a focus not common in an industry that emphasizes in-game entertainment. In a practical sense, this may mean encouraging the development of relationships between fans, face-to-face (perhaps through fan meetups on non-game days as well as pre- and post-game parties) and online (by creating Twitter hashtags during games and organizing message boards). This would encourage identification between fans and teams by painting teams as reflections of their communities and the fans who follow them. Many teams around the world already do these things, but others are still catching up.

While the world of organized sports seems inherently predestined for the development of buffers based on the unique relationships it creates, buffers should not be disregarded by crisis communicators in other fields, such as business and politics. In fact, crisis communicators working in those fields would do well to emulate some of the conditions for creating buffers described in this article, which may very well help them weather their own unique crises.

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