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Risk Bearers' Narratives Following a Crisis: The Complexities of Community Identity

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Abstract

This study explores one of the worst industrial accidents in U.S. history from the perspective of stakeholders' narratives within zones of meaning with the goal of advancing scholarship and providing practitioners with a better understanding of residents' dialogue and constructed community identity following a crisis. This study follows a qualitative, narrative analysis approach by conducting in-depth interviews (N=18) with residents surrounding the crisis event. The study identified narratives that constructed group identities in a community affected by crisis and offers a frame to better understand contextual complexities of the risk-bearing communities, their communicative expectations from an organization, and sense-making process during an industrial crisis. The analysis reveals three distinct community groups (1) *not disturbed*, (2) *directly traumatized*, and (3) *indirectly troubled*. Each group's narrative makes sense of the TVA and the crisis differently. These findings are discussed as narrative disruption, control, trust, and familiarity of a risk. In addition, over time, community narratives change and a clear expert and lay public emerge that shape the longer-term discourse surrounding the crisis event. Practical applications based on the analysis are provided.

**Risk Bearers' Narratives Following a Crisis:
The Complexities of Community Identity**

Post-industrial societies regularly face crises originating from industrial accidents and are an inherent element of human life within the increasing complexities of post-modern societies. Part of these new complexities is the challenge of how to examine organizational crisis from stakeholders' perspectives with the goal of providing practitioners with a better understanding of their narratives and constructed community identity influenced by a crisis event.

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), the nation's largest public utility, was at the root of a sudden and severe crisis when a tidal wave of 5.4 million cubic yards of fly ash and water spill destroyed 400 acres of land and houses in Roane County, Tennessee. Tennessee is not alone; in 2014 it was estimated that an estimated 35 million gallons of coal ash and contaminated wastewater spilled into a North Carolina river from a Duke Energy ash dump (Biesecker, 2014).

This study focuses on one of the many stakeholders involved in these types of crises: the nearby resident risk bearers. By seeking to capture and understand the voices of those affected by a crisis, this research project falls into a recent tradition of focusing less on the organizational and media responses and more on the stakeholders' perceptions, interpretations, and shared discussion of the crisis in an effort to both further public relations scholarship and share practical information to enhance public relations practitioners' job performance before, during and after a crisis event. To advance an understanding of risk bearers' crisis experiences, this study follows a qualitative, narrative analysis approach by conducting in-depth interviews (N=18) with residents surrounding the TVA ash spill. The analysis reveals three distinct community groups (1) *not disturbed*, (2) *directly traumatized*, and (3) *indirectly troubled*. These findings are discussed as narrative disruption, control, trust, and familiarity of a risk. In addition, over time, community narratives change and a clear expert and lay public emerge that shape the longer-term

discourse surrounding the crisis event.

Risk Societies and Crisis Communication

Postindustrial societies can be characterized by their development from modern to risk societies (Beck & Holzer, 2007), where the locus of risk has shifted from nature-based, or outside risks, to industrial ones. These risks are rooted in the decision-making processes of organizations and corporations, who take calculable risks in order to advance, change and create business (Beck & Holzer, 2007). At the heart of this misperception about acceptable versus actual risk levels is a communication gap between those who decide which risks are allowable and those who bear the risk. Increasing technological complexity and fragmentation of organizational processes augment this gap between experts and risk bearers (Goldstein, 2005).

Heath and O'Hair (2009) suggested that when a risk event is manifest, it becomes a crisis. In addition, according to Hearit and Courtright (2004), "crisis management is a distinctly communicative phenomenon in which participants construct the meaning crises hold" (p. 205). Although the actual crisis event is not a social construction, the understanding, interpretation, and meaning of it are.

As contestable events, those interpretations and narratives that best allow for co-creation of meaning or overlapping zones of meaning will frame the perceived dimensions of crisis (Heath & Millar, 2004). In addition, crisis situations are a struggle for control that can be achieved on two levels: actions and communication. Interpretations of the event will not only be offered by the organization but also by all stakeholders involved. These different groups will present their stories in the marketplace of ideas, creating a rhetorical challenge (Heath & Millar, 2004).

Narrative Theory and Crisis

Following Fisher's (1987) narrative paradigm that "human beings are inherently storytellers who have the natural capacity to recognize the coherence and fidelity of stories they tell and experience" (p. 24), all human communication is viewed as narrative. When a narrative changes from one of routine and continuity to one of disruption (e.g., crisis), persons and organizations typically come forward to advocate a story that best interprets the event (Heath, 2004). The crisis story has to withstand these competing narratives. Fisher stated that narratives are judged on the basis of fidelity (trustworthiness and reliability of a story) and coherence (if a story "hangs together"). At first glance, people may think of a story as nothing more than a descriptive recounting of events. But it is more than this. According to Foss (1996), "A narrative, as a frame upon experience, functions as an argument to view and understand the world in a particular way, and by analyzing that narrative, the critic can understand the argument being made and the likelihood that it will be successful in gaining adherence for the perspective it presents" (p. 400). The story, in this sense, goes beyond pure description.

Narratives provide a means for people to think about things and order events that are problematic for how they see the world. As people order their events, according to Heath (2004), those thematic patterns express their values and their actions. Narratives also have "substantial rhetorical potency because they are a conventional and convenient means for understanding the theme that runs throughout a series of events – including a crisis" (p. 172). Narratives simplify; even when they are profoundly incorrect, they nevertheless have the ability to facilitate the attribution of motivation.

Stakeholders in a Crisis

Most crisis communication approaches focus on strategically managing a crisis in order to mitigate harm. It is within this context that the importance of stakeholders has been defined (e.g., Albu & Wihmeier, 2014; Coombs, 2006). Within the public relations literature, stakeholders are defined as a group of people who are affected by or who affect an organization in achieving its goals (Rawlins, 2006). Applying this approach and maintaining good relationships with stakeholders have shown to be a helpful resource during a time of crisis (Coombs, 2006). In contrast, mismanaging stakeholder relationships can lead to crisis or increase the harm to the organization and stakeholders.

Narrative crisis analysis has largely focused on the narratives evaluated in media and organizational and media communication; sense-making (e.g., Gephart, 2007; Roberts, Madsen, & Desai, 2007) has been studied in many contexts. Little research has been conducted studying the social realities, sense-making process, and narratives told by the risk bearers, although many authors agree upon the importance of better understanding these groups (e.g., Coombs, 2007; Veil, Reynolds, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2008). For examples, Waymer and Heath (2007) focused on marginalized groups affected by natural disaster and Palenchar's (2008) ethnographic study of risk bearers' narratives focused on community sense-making of risk.

Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)

On May 18, 1933, Congress enacted the Tennessee Valley Authority Act, whose purpose, as amended through P.L. 106-580, Dec. 29, 2000, is threefold – energy development, environmental stewardship and economic development. The TVA is also the largest public utility in the United States. One of its many facilities is the Kingston Fossil Plant located in Roane County, Tennessee, on a peninsula formed by the meeting of the Emory and Clinch Rivers. Commissioned in 1951, one of the byproducts of

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such plants is coal ash, which includes fly and bottom ash as well as boiler slag, which is created when coal is burned in boilers that produce steam for producing energy and industrial functions (Environmental Protection Agency, 2012). TVA began storing ash in a holding pond located next to the plant in 1954. Originally 85-acres, the pond was expanded until it reached its final size of 275 acres. The dike walls were increased three times after initial construction. Since 2003, seepages at the pond walls have been observed; remedial effort was put into collecting the overflow (AECOM Technology Corporation, 2009).

The TVA Coal Ash Spill

On December 22, 2008, an earthen wall of the Kingston Fossil Plant ash retention pond broke, releasing 5.4 million cubic yards of fly ash that had been stored in the pond (“Ash spill,” 2008). The coal ash sludge covered the surrounding area, reaching 5-6 feet high and destroying 12 homes. In addition, the sludge caused a train wreck, major gas pipeline rupture, and major environmental harm (White, 2008). As the ash poured into the rivers, it created an estimated 47-foot-high flood wave that destroyed docks, boats, and other structures in its path (AECOM Technology Corporation, 2009; Fowler, 2009). The towns initially affected included Kingston and Harriman, Tennessee. There were more than 22 residential evacuations although there were no deaths or major injuries to report (Ahillen, 2012). A detailed explanation of the health, safety, and environmental impact is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a July 2009 news report CNN (2009) deemed the ash spill the worst environmental disaster in the United States.

Among major summary points in the TVA’s Office of Inspector General’s Inspection Report (Moore, 2009) it was determined that: (1) “TVA failed to investigate and report management practices that contributed to the Kingston spill” (p. 3); (2) “TVA could have possibly prevented the Kingston Spill if it had taken recommended corrective actions” (p. 4); (3) “TVA’s Enterprise Risk Management Program

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did not adequately address known risks associated with ash ponds” (p. 6); and (4) “the culture of TVA’s fossil fuel plants impacted ash management” (p. 6).

Many issues surrounding the event have been discussed in the media since the spill occurred. For example, the TVA and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have conducted tests and continued to monitor air and water quality. TVA also established an outreach center in Kingston, staffed with employees who answered questions and assisted in filing claims. Additionally, a toll-free number was provided in letters to the community, newspapers, and online (www.tva.gov) for inquiries and concerns. Law firms and community groups also called meetings (Lakin, 2009) as environmentalists and community members rallied around the event, organizing a protest march in the town of Kingston (United Mountain Defense, 2009). Overall expenses related to the cleanup will cost the utility approximately \$1.1 billion, including the purchase of approximately 180 properties around the spill. The TVA also paid \$43 million for restoration work to the Roane County Economic Development Foundation and \$27.8 million in damages settlements to 847 plaintiffs (Knoxville News Sentinel Editorial Board, 2014).

Aside from the destruction due to the sludge, coal ash contains heavy metals such as arsenic and lead. Ambiguity and competing narratives arose when TVA and the EPA stated that their tests had shown levels of toxins that measured within public health standards (Flory, 2009; “Lead and thallium,” 2008). But other groups, such as researchers from Duke University, reported that their independent measures of samples showed levels of toxins that can cause health damage (Barker, 2009; “ORNL scientist”, 2009).

For large portions of 2009, TVA was in the middle of a full-blown crisis and crisis communication operation, facing various communication demands from victims, customers, politicians, government agencies, media, and environmental groups. Successful management of the ash spill crisis would require crisis communication with all key stakeholders. Therefore, this research focuses on the community residents’ risk bearers’ experiences with the TVA ash spill, their realities, sense-making processes, and narratives. The following research questions guide this study:

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RQ1: What are the narratives of the people living in the communities affected by the TVA coal ash spill?

RQ2: How do the people living in the communities affected by the TVA coal ash spill make sense of this crisis?

Method

In order to study the experiences and perceptions of those affected by the crisis, a phenomenological approach guided this project. While phenomenology has had limited use in risk or crisis communication research (Palenchar, 2011), it is both the appropriate, and some would argue ideal, method to build understanding of knowledge from everyday life experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The phenomenological tradition encapsulates the individual's experience to better comprehend the socially constructed life-world (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990), and the participants' perceptions, including their narratives, of the occurrence are the primary source of knowledge that enhances nuanced interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). In order to best capture the risk bearers' realities and understand their sense-making and experiences, 18 in-depth interviews with 20 community members were conducted. After IRB approval and signing confidentiality consent forms, the interviews were audio-recorded. The individual interviews ranged from 23 to 70 minutes.

To allow for the participants' stories to evolve naturally, an emergent discussion guide based on eliciting narrative-structured responses built the frame for the interview (McCracken, 1988). Each interview took its own course and followed the sense-making process and story of the participant. The guideline for this research project consisted of four broad topic areas: The TVA ash spill, experience with the company, information gathering, and contextual information. For participant comfort and additional contextual information, the participants selected the interview site, usually their homes or local businesses (McCracken, 1988). Redundancy in themes was achieved, justifying the number of collected community

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responses (McCracken, 1988). Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling technique with an initial contact at community events.

One researcher and two transcribers, who both signed confidentiality agreements, transcribed the interviews. During the transcription process, identifying markers were removed to ensure confidentiality. The names of all participants cited below have been changed. As the interviewer was the instrument for the data collection, bracketing of personal experience occurred throughout the study period prior to analysis (Patton, 1990).

The interviews were then analyzed inductively, exploring “the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis” in the data (Patton, 1990, p. 390) according to established narrative analysis guidelines. In a second step, typologies were created from the individual concepts. The last step, the structural synthesis built the frame of categories within which the individual meanings are described (Patton, 1990).

Analysis

In answer to the research questions, narratives revealed a cohesive story about life in Roane County and the role of TVA prior to the ash spill. After the crisis, narratives revealed the creation of at least three distinct community groups that share similar experiences and interpretations of the spill as well as TVA’s communicative response. Each community group also made sense of the event differently.

Narratives that Construct Group Identities

TVA and Life in Roane County

The data revealed that all participants had similar descriptions of life in Roane County and perceptions of TVA before the ash spill.

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Kingston and Harriman – Garden of Eden. Most respondents either grew up in Roane County or are in a relationship/marriage with someone who is originally from the area. They all seem to feel closely connected to the area; making this a community of choice. The retired population, in particular, has strong ties to either TVA or to Oak Ridge National Laboratories (Oak Ridge), as they themselves have worked there. Many describe Roane County's appeal: the small-town character, the people and friendly community, the safety it provides for raising children, the good relations to neighbors and the supportive church communities, as well as being near several other larger cities. "It's a great community. You knew all your neighbors" (Mrs. Casey).

All participants referred to water as being "a big factor in Kingston" (Mr. Y) and as one of the primary reasons residents enjoy living there. Swimming, boating, and spending time with friends and family are common leisure activities. "We use the river a lot as a socializing place and our family and our friends, you know, they come down and the grandkids have swam in the water, and I swim" (Mrs. Jet). Mr. Art sums up how he feels about living in Kingston when he calls it his "Garden of Eden."

TVA – The powerful employer of the region. All participants referred to the historical importance TVA that played in the area. TVA's plant is a dominant landmark in the community that can be seen from almost every part of Kingston and Harriman: "They [the smokestacks] were my kid's landmarks for every time we came home from trips away, we would be driving down the interstate and it was a game, who would spot the stacks first" (Mrs. Trav). In addition, TVA is viewed as an important employer of the region. Furthermore, TVA is the manager of the waterways. If a resident wishes to build a dock, TVA has to approve it: "They made the lake. (...) they actually still own to a certain elevation. They allow you to put a dock on what they consider their property which goes down and touches the lake (...)" (Mrs. Ville). Residents often referred to the flooding of the area in the 1920s and 30s.

Some participants suggest that TVA's culture has changed in recent years with concern over money and short-term business decisions overshadowing long-term community relations — an

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organizational shift in values to which the ash spill is tied. The connection is particularly strong among those who have worked in and retired from TVA: “then we let go of the cap that use to be, the cap on salaries. So there were things that tended to make me feel like TVA was on a downward spiral ...” (Mrs. Jet).

The TVA Ash Spill

After the spill, narratives reveal the formation of three community groups, each with distinct narratives framing the event and TVA. The three groups are: (1) *not disturbed*, (2) *directly traumatized*, and (3) *indirectly troubled* (see Table 1).

The first group (N=10; male=6, female=4) is composed of residents *who do not feel affected by the TVA ash spill*, those *not disturbed*. They continue with life as usual, which includes boating and swimming in the area’s waterways and supporting TVA. This group also tends to criticize what they deem the unwarranted worries of other residents. The second group (N=3; female=3) consists of those residents who feel that *TVA deems them to be affected by the ash spill*, those *directly traumatized*. These risk bearers lost their houses or the coal ash sludge impacted their properties. Their lives significantly changed after the spill and they view TVA critically. The third group (N=7; male=4, female=3) is composed of residents who *feel affected but are not acknowledged as such by TVA*, those *indirectly troubled*. The lives of the people in this group have changed after the ash spill and they hold a negative view or even outrage towards TVA. For example, all of the interview participants who are involved in litigation fall into this group.

Table 1

Overview of Interviewees and Narratives the Construct Group Identities

Not Disturbed	Mickey	April 15, 2009
	Aladdin	April 17, 2009
	Lester	April 18, 2009
	Daisy	June 12, 2009
	Mr. X	June 16, 2009
	Mr. Y	June 16, 2009
	Mr. Best	June 19, 2009
	Mrs. Engy	June 22, 2009
	Mrs. Trav & mother	July 6, 2009
Directly Traumatized	Mrs. Casey	May 15, 2009
	Mrs. Ball	June 27, 2009
	Mrs. Spiel	June 30, 2009
Indirectly Troubled	Father Mickey = Fisher	April 30, 2009
	Mrs. Ville	May 13, 2009
	Mrs. Reality	May 19, 2009
	Mr. & Mrs. Jet	June 17, 2009
	Mr. Art	June 18, 2009
	Mr. Nice	July 13, 2009

Although these three groups form around distinct narrative themes, they should not be viewed as static categories but rather as a continuum ranging from residents who are calm and not worried (e.g., Lester), those residents who show mixed feelings towards TVA (e.g., Mr. Nice), to those that display strong outrage (e.g., Mr. Art). The broad range of responses points to the complexities surrounding this, and thus likely, other industrial accidents.

Impacts of the ash spill. One major theme is the personal stories of when and how respondents first found out about it. For example, Mrs. Casey and Mrs. Spiel had emotional stories of the night when they were awoken and drawn out of their house by the crashing noises to find mud in their backyards and their neighbor's house moved from its foundation:

We had just turned the lights off, (...) I heard what sounded like a train. (...) Well, when I looked I saw, just a tidal wave of water, rushing into the yard and knew something, you know, a dam had

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a broken, something terrible happened because there is just not that much water there. And I could see debris, chunks of something just by the moon because the electricity had gone out. (...) You know, it was just, it was surreal. (...) No power, coldest night in the year and woke up to it and knew; hoping when we went to sleep, this might have just been a dream [laughs] and then, we woke up to it... (Mrs. Spiel)

This group of directly affected residents had to deal not only with the loss of their homes but with the process of relocation as well. All three respondents that were moved stressed a sense of “homelessness.”

Most respondents, though, found out about the ash spill the next morning. Some residents found “grey stuff” in their coves and on their property, and some docks had been damaged (e.g., Mr. and Mrs. Jet, Mrs. Trav, Mrs. Ball). Others had seen or heard about it on the news (e.g., Mr. Y). The residents mention a plethora of concerns that they fear will or already have impacted them and the community: health problems, decline of property values, loss of income, loss of enjoyment, problems with trucks and dirt in the community, the monetary impact on TVA leading to increases in electricity rates, not getting the spill cleaned up, and short- and long-term environmental damage. Although all participants have concerns about the ash spill, they interpret the severity and extent of its impact differently. Those *not disturbed*, group one for instance, are not as concerned with the ash spill in general, but they do realize that the cleanup costs may impact their electricity bill in the future. They also mention potential impacts for the environment, and that cleanup may take a very long time. Some areas, they acknowledge, may just not be restored to what they used to be. These concerns are partially expected due to the nature of the event. Only rate increases due to lawsuit expenses are met with contention, and are blamed on the people who are suing the company.

Health impacts are one of the most pressing concerns for the second group, those *directly traumatized* by the spill. The respondents worry that their children or grandchildren may get sick from exposure to the water. Asthma attacks and other respiratory problems are reported (e.g., Mr. Art), as well

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as allergies or skin rashes (e.g., Mr. Jet). Aside from immediate health problems, worries about the potential long-term effects of continuous exposure to heavy metals are mentioned.

Related is the personal loss of enjoyment: “suing them for loss of income. On top of other things which you know in general, you know a loss of use of enjoyment, deterioration of depreciation of my home and so on and so forth, stress and anxiety” (Mrs. Reality). As stated above, many residents actively and regularly use the water for swimming, boating, fishing and other activities (Mr. Art). Most feel that, at least for the current time, the usual enjoyment of the water will not be possible.

TVA’s Communication Response to the Ash Spill

Group one: Residents not disturbed by the TVA ash spill. Those unaffected evaluate TVA’s communication approach by stating that TVA did a good job, “handling it well” (Mr. Y). The company made a mistake and is now doing everything to clean up the mess and make the community whole again. Not only are these group members supporting TVA, but they suggest that the organization’s efforts are actually thwarted by “out-of-towners” and others seeking personal profit. If “these people” left TVA alone, TVA would continue doing the right thing (Mr. Best). They also defend TVA’s lack of preparation for such a crisis. Mr. X says, “you know I have a hard pill to swallow in saying TVA did me wrong because they weren’t prepared for what was happening. I’m not sure anybody woulda been prepared for it.” These residents essentially trust TVA and the information it provides.

Members of this group point out two aspects that TVA should improve. First, TVA does not tell people *why* it is doing certain things (Mrs. Engy). The information in the news media focuses on what TVA is doing but rarely provides TVA’s explanations for these actions. The second critique aligns with other community members’ bad experiences with the outreach center. Mrs. Engy was trying to offer help but had “to call another number and then call another number, call another number.” Mrs. Trav had very good experiences with the people who were sent to her house, but when she visited the outreach center to ask a few questions she “got the impression that the people in the outreach center were -what would be

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the word? I don't know, they were assistance of some sort and they really didn't have any knowledge or any answers, but they weren't allowed to say so.”

Group two: Residents directly traumatized by the TVA ash spill. Those directly affected view the actions of the company more critically than the first group. All three residents initially felt neglected by TVA. It took the organization three days to contact the families who had sludge on their properties. During these three-days uncertainty and anxiety were extremely high (Mrs. Spiel and Mrs. Casey). The communication the families received during this initial period was the same as all of the other community members, which primarily occurred through the media and community meetings. The families evaluated TVA CEO Tom Kilgore's initial information as an attempt to downplay the magnitude of the event.

The first personal contact the families had with TVA was through the outreach personnel that came to the families. Personnel were characterized as very nice and helpful. Within a few weeks, all impacted families were moved into temporary housing. Mrs. Casey, Mrs. Ball, and Mrs. Spiel evaluated this process as effortless and positive. Although communication had increased from the initial neglect, all three nevertheless evaluated communication as difficult. They often had to initiate the communication with the organization. Although similarly affected, the experiences of Mrs. Casey and Mrs. Spiel's families with TVA and its management varied. The delayed communication response destroyed trust and prior positive relationships between TVA and these community members, and continued to jeopardize positive communication relationships in the future.

Group three: Residents indirectly troubled. Those indirectly affected but unacknowledged moved through different stages of communication with TVA. Most felt that in its initial communication, “they started out really good” (Mrs. Trav). TVA was facing a bad situation but they promised to make the community whole again. During the first week, “They made promises and Tom Kilgore, the CEO, came right out himself to speak with us and he reassured us. So, initially everybody believed him that he was going to make us whole and take care of the community and take care of, make sure that none of us

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suffered” (Mrs. Ball). TVA offered some specific help to residents (e.g. rebuilding docks; building fences to prevent pets and children from getting into the water; monitoring water and air quality) while at the same time asking for community support.

Many community members lost trust in what TVA said: “I doubt anybody can tell me anything that I can just trust because I think there has been a corporate decision that says ‘downplay it, divert the attention, tell everybody that it is going to be all sweetness and honey and clover and wonderful and beautiful later on’” (Mr. Jet). For these residents, TVA’s response seemed to have changed, because “once the media attention dies, then TVA’s attention will go somewhere else” (Mrs. Casey). Eventually, the communication became more and more legalistic and open communication with the organization no longer seemed possible.

Community Sense-Making of the TVA Ash Spill

Many residents describe the ash spill and its impact in comparison to other incidents. One set of descriptions compares the ash spill to a natural disaster. The sound of the spill was like a Tornado moving through residents’ backyards. The tidal wave or tsunami was responsible for taking out docks, destroying boats and leaving “grey stuff” on banks downstream. Similar to the impacts of a natural disaster, the ash spill is described as devastating to the community, a catastrophe that will have long-term impacts comparable to the Exxon Valdez oil spill. Many describe the landscape they saw after the spill as a moonscape.

Other ways residents made sense of the impact was to compare the potential dangers of the ash spill to concerns about nuclear issues related to living near Oak Ridge, Tennessee, whose nickname is “Atomic City” because the city was established as a production site for the Manhattan Project and it remains a scientific-focused community with a significant presence from the Department of Energy, Oak Ridge National Laboratory, and the Y-12 National Security Complex. For example, the residents accept the risks presented by the nuclear waste seepage from Oak Ridge. Respondents shared that you are not to

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eat the fish out of the river and as long as the bottom layers of the rivers and lakes remain undisturbed, the impact from the waste is minimal. Water pollution in Oak Ridge is a well-known risk among community members. The ash spill and its impacts are uncertain in comparison. Residents do not know if swimming is safe. Additionally, the dredging of the river (as part of the cleanup efforts) may release or disturb the old waste from Oak Ridge bringing the buried risk back as a real and uncertain threat.

All residents referred to the role of TVA in making sense of what and why it happened. The residents point out that it was TVA's fault, although some are more lenient in their assessments than others. Whereas some residents point out that TVA knew or at least had to know that the dam was insufficient, others stated that no one could have imagined or envisioned that this would ever happen.

The three groups differ in how they make sense of community responses to the spill. Group one (*not disturbed*) sees TVA as the cause for the spill, but also as trying to make things right. Yet, they allege that some people in the community are to blame for many of the problems. The out-of-towners do not have faith in TVA, are overly worried and are reacting by suing. In the eyes of these community members, the "Brockovich" people or "out-of-towners" blew the situation out of proportion (Mrs. Jet, Mrs. Trav).

Group two (*directly traumatized*) views the situation similarly. They also believe that some people are only trying to gain financially from the crisis. Yet, they express sympathy and understanding for people who see the spill on a regular basis and "want out" of the situation. TVA, they insist, should help these people.

Group three (*indirectly troubled*) makes sense of the situation differently. Most respondents in this group are aware of what other community members think about the lawsuits and complaints – that they are inappropriate or illegitimate. They stress that it's not the money they are interested in, but rather getting justice for the community and showing TVA that it cannot do whatever it wants. These residents

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view it as their duty to step up against this giant organization. Some also voice their disbelief about the perceived complacency and inaction among long-term residents in town (e.g., Mrs. Realty).

Discussion and Conclusion

In the following discussion the analysis is integrated into current risk and crisis scholarship and typologies. The data from the narrative analysis confirms and supports previous risk and crisis communication researchers' findings, including narrative disruption and control, zones of meaning with platforms for alternative voices, trust, and familiarity of risk. These findings have direct implications for enhancing practitioners' job performance and for better understanding key stakeholders, in this case community risk bearers.

Narrative Disruption and Control

At the core of most research on risk communication is a disruption between the risk-generating organization and stakeholders. A crisis serves to breach individual, organizational, and community narratives of internal and/or external control (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). As such, it creates a rhetorical exigency for numerous stakeholders. When this disruption of the dominant narratives concerning a risk or crisis is enacted and accepted by stakeholders, there is a return to normalcy and post-crisis communication functions can be implemented.

The small-town identity and community narrative was disrupted when TVA's retention pond broke and a major industrial crisis threatened the community. As Conrad (1992) noted, organizations' primary narratives are narratives of control; when the narrative of control is dislocated, it can have an effect on the risk bearers of the crisis event. The once seemingly united community splintered into at least three groups within months of the accident, each with distinct narratives to create zones of meaning and explain the ash spill event — especially the stories brought forth by group one (*not disturbed*) and three (*indirectly troubled*), who are competing for control and power in the discourse. TVA's narrative, that there is no health impact resulting from the ash, correlates with the stories of group one and works in

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conjunction – that the crisis was unpredictable and that those “outsiders” and “certain residents” just want to make noise and make a profit from the ash spill.

Zones of Meaning with Platforms for Alternative Voices

The concept of zones of meaning is important for both risk and crisis communication scholars and practitioners. Coined by Heath (1993), this perspective was developed from Burke's (1966) concept of *terministic screens* that allow people to process, filter and form interpretations of reality and prescribe corresponding behaviors. Thus, according to Burke, meaning is created and expressed through these terministic screens and once these interpretive patterns of perceiving and talking about reality become observable through actions and discussions, according to Heath (1993), they become zones of meaning that can be analyzed with appropriate risk and crisis communication initiated.

The themes that will last or emerge as dominant are not clear. Yet, their struggle becomes clear throughout the three-month-long data-collection process that occurred four months after the crisis event. TVA's interpretation seems muted in the discussion and such an information void will lead others to manage the information, often through new media (Stephens & Malone, 2009). Neither side presents communication from TVA or provided by TVA, except for the initial communication (making the community whole again). Crisis communicators advise when there is a crisis (narrative disruption) it necessitates the generation of a crisis narrative by the risk-generating organization (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). In this case, however, due to delays in communication, TVA gave up its own narrative and therefore power and control over the stories emerging in the media and the community.

This situation can create “a platform for alternative voices (e.g., stakeholders, various publics, the media) to exert influence on the source organization and the crisis” (Waymer & Heath, 2007, p. 294). It becomes apparent that strong counter-narratives have formed among community residents. For group two (*directly traumatized*) and group three (*indirectly troubled*), the TVA takes on the role of the villain who is blamed for the crisis. The community members are the victims of the unethical all-powerful

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corporation. Group one's (*not disturbed*) narrative, in contrast, paints TVA as the victim and certain community members as greedy for making a bad situation worse with litigation.

Trust

Additionally, the lack of communication increased the distrust in both of these groups in the community. For this reason, the assessment of risk communication challenges needs to address the “trust gap” as a primary factor (Priest, Bonfadelli, & Rusanen, 2003). Previous research, such as Ropeik and Gray (2002) among others, suggests that people tend to be less afraid of risks that come from places, people, corporations or other organizations that they trust and are more afraid if the risk comes from a source they do not trust.

The initial vacuum of communication with those affected created distrust that was never regained by TVA – even with the efforts of relocation. The difficulty many felt in getting in contact with TVA made it worse. The indirectly affected went from trusting TVA to distrust and anger resulting in legal actions against TVA. Open communication with these two groups may have saved TVA lawsuits and money, while re-establishing goodwill and trust that will be very difficult to rebuild.

Familiarity of Risk

After the spill different community groups, and their related zones of meaning, emerged with similar backgrounds and stories. The *not disturbed group* is largely made up of scientists and engineers who have worked for TVA itself or for the nuclear industry in Oak Ridge. The group can be labeled as mostly consisting of experts in the field; if not experts themselves, the remaining members subscribe to similar reasoning and explanations as the experts in this group. The other two groups (*directly traumatized, indirectly troubled*), although most are highly educated, are not scientists or engineers in related disciplines. Most of them have to make sense of the ash's chemical composition and its potential impacts for the first time. This part of the community can be described as more of a lay public (compare e.g., Connor & Siegrist, 2010; Blok, Jensen & Kalsoft, 2008; Michael, 1992).

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The community members interviewed voluntarily selected to live with a known risk (e.g., nuclear waste in the water systems). Research clearly demonstrated that voluntarily accepting risk reduces the sense of risk and support for the organization generating risk (Heath & Palenchar, 2000; Palenchar & Heath, 2002). In contrast, new and unknown risks with involuntary exposure create higher levels of perceived risk. The risk from the fly ash, although scientifically (and potentially) less harmful than nuclear waste, in the community-members' view, is less familiar, less certain, and not a voluntary choice therefore more concerning. It is clear that the community is not part of the risk dialogue with TVA, although a more progressive approach to risk and crisis communication focuses on a long-term shared dialogue and decision making regarding risk-generating organizations and nearby residents.

Development of Community Identity

Aside from the integration of findings into risk and crisis communication scholarship, the analysis of the three-month long data collection also showed how narratives change over time and community identities evolve. The development of an expert and lay public has been observed in other risk settings (Michael, 1992) and adds an additional layer of understanding to the complexities of risk bearers experience post crisis. The opposing community narratives that establish over time show an expert public (TVA & group 1) and a lay public (groups 2 and 3) that develop in response to TVA's lack of inclusive dialogue (see Figure 1). Before the ash spill, the community and TVA had similar goals (Michael, 1992). TVA sought profit but also provided services (electricity). The community members liked the quiet and safe community and greatly enjoyed water activities, and appreciated TVA as an employer and provider in the community. In this stage scientific discourse was limited; TVA was the expert. The community placed trust in the organization and its expertise. But an event, such as the ash spill, violated these expectations (Coombs, 2007) and new goals were created (Michael, 1992) for the TVA and the community.

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The community began to divide into groups. In the early phase, those directly affected emerged as a distinct group requiring immediate attention and assistance from TVA. The organization does not fulfill this role until a few days after the spill and even the long-term communication and relationship between TVA and this group remains strained.

The rest of the community perceived that TVA's goals were similar to their own and included cleaning up the ash spill; making the community whole again; reducing litigation; taking corrective action; and taking limited blame. The community perceived the TVA experts as being able to manage and handle the situation. The short-term response therefore seemed to have been fairly well received by most community members. The greatest mistakes TVA made during this time was to not immediately take care of those directly affected and to make promises which it could not keep (e.g., stating that the ash spill was going to be cleaned up within a few weeks).

The community's sense-making evolved and changed after three to five months. Whereas those affected continued to be in negotiations with the organization and displayed low-trust levels the groups of the community experts and lay people emerged (Blok et al., 2008). The expert community's narratives and identity seem to overlap with TVA's expert perspective. They take a pro-scientific stand and share a common narrative of small but manageable risks due to the fly ash (Blok et al., 2008). Their communication of science (Michael, 1992) draws boundaries of us vs. them to the lay community groups. Talking with knowledge and certainty, because they have experience and understanding, sets these community members apart from the others and places them in closer relation to TVA and its expert narrative.

In contrast, the other groups in the community combine to create a lay-public identity of fatalism (Marshall & Picou, 2008). The perceived power differential between TVA as expert and themselves is made quite clear. The longer the efforts are ongoing, the more this group seems to feel uncertain about the risks and that the TVA is hiding important information and does not value the public's opinion. This

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conflict has been observed in many different expert and lay-public discourses (e.g., Michael, 1992). To make decisions about post-normal events (such as major catastrophes) (Marshall & Picou, 2008), the entire community needs to be included in dialogue and decision making. This approach using post-normal science gives value and power to local knowledge and concerns.

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Figure 1. Development of Community Identity Before and After the TVA Ash Spill

Community Identity (prior to ash spill)	Crisis Event	Short-Term Community Identity Changes	Crisis Communication & Management Response	Long-Term Community Identity Changes
<p>Quiet and Safe Community</p> <p>Enjoy Water Activities</p> <p>TVA Provides Jobs and Water Safety (Flood Control)</p>	<p>Expectations Violated For Those Directly Affected by the Ash Spill</p>	<p>TVA Did Not Immediately Take Care of Those Directly Affected by Ash Spill</p> <p>Made Early Promises that were Not Kept</p>	<p>Narrative Disturbed</p>	<p><i>Directly Traumatized</i> – Those Who the Risk-Generating Organization Deems Affected</p> <p>Lay-Public – Identities of Fatalistic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Perceived Power Differential Between TVA as Expert and Themselves · Conflict Ties into Larger Societal Changes of Post-Normal Science (Marshall & Picou, 2008) · Loss of Trust
<p>Scientific Experts (Oak Ridge, TVA, Other Federal Organizations and Private Companies)</p> <p>Lay People (“Experts” in Other Areas)</p>	<p>Expectations Not Violated For Those Not Directly Affected by the Ash Spill</p>	<p>Perception of Equal Goals with TVA – Cleaning Up Ash Spill, Making Community Whole Again,</p> <p>Accident/Mistakes Happen</p> <p>TVA Experts Know what They are Doing</p>	<p>Narrative Disturbed</p>	<p><i>Indirectly Troubled</i> – Those Who Feel Affected but are Not Recognized by the Risk-Generating Organization</p> <p>Lay-Public – Identities of Fatalistic:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Perceived Power Differential Between TVA as Expert and Themselves · Conflict Ties into Larger Societal Changes of Post-Normal Science (Marshall & Picou, 2008) · Loss of Trust
			<p>Narrative Not Disturbed</p>	<p><i>Not Disturbed</i> – Those Who Support the Risk-Generating Organization and Positively Evaluates its Crisis Management</p> <p>Primarily Composed of Community’s Scientific Experts – Identities Overlap with TVA Expert Perspective</p> <p>Some lay public but pro-scientific</p>

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In general, all community members are making sense of a threat that has changed their lifestyle and was imposed on the community. An outside force has taken away the reasons why people live in Roane County. Part of the community explains this threat by focusing on the community members who are aggravating the situation with lawsuits and out-of-towners who do not know the city and situation well. The other part of the community blames TVA for creating and imposing the threat on the community and not taking proper actions.

This study clearly points to many of the complexities surrounding an ongoing crisis event. The methodology of in-depth interviews provided the opportunity to construct the multiple layers of community sense-making, its development over time, and some explanations for the development. Community identity, enacted through shared narratives, has strong power and is combined with an expert – laypersons dialogue. Much research has studied the perceptions of scientific and laypersons dialogue and some of those findings were useful in explaining and understanding phenomena observed in this study. Furthermore, crisis communication literature can be extended by this view of the community and long-term changes within a community. Practical applications drawn from this study are summarized in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Communication Application for Organizations Facing Crisis

1. Be the first to tell your organization's story after the crisis. Ensure the story is accurate and credible. Trust lost early is difficult to rebuild.
2. Stay in honest and open communication with all risk bearers.
3. Take control of the crisis narrative early. Monitor the emergence of counter narratives. Understand these and enter into an open dialogue with those sharing these stories.
4. Objective scientific assessment of risk is only one factor in risk bearers' sense making in uncertain crisis situations. Listen to concerns and fears.
5. Do not dismiss risk bearers' fears but understand the foundation of these concerns. Enter into an open dialogue to alleviate fears, and to create and maintain trust.

Similar to other qualitative studies based on in-depth interviews, this study portrayed a limited amount of responses from the community. Results are not generalizable to the community as a whole.

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Additionally, the size of each group differs greatly. It is questionable whether all have the same importance in the rhetorical discourse to interpret the event. Furthermore, the role of the media and its narratives should be integrated to form a better understanding of how certain narratives may be influenced. Facts reported by the respondents often seem to be based on news stories.

Ultimately, narrative analysis is a helpful and insightful approach to analyze and understand ongoing crisis. The actual competition of narratives, where these form and how they may be modified becomes very clear in this analysis. As the field continues to evolve in concept and expand in concerns of stakeholders and related private, governmental, and nongovernmental organizations, there remains a tremendous opportunity for additional research into risk bearers' sense-making during a crisis.

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