



This is not a race, this is a farce: Formula One and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway tire crisis

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ABSTRACT

Formula One is the most technologically advanced and financially lucrative form of motorsport in the world with global audiences in the billions over the course of a season. A highly unusual and potentially deadly set of events took place during the Friday practice for the sixth annual United States Grand Prix at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. Controversy and blame soon followed. Using Benoit's public relations and image restoration strategy framework, this paper examines the different strategies employed during the crisis by the Formula One teams, Michelin, the Federation Internationale De L'Automobile, Formula One Management, and the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. An examination of the crisis situation at the United States Grand Prix allows this study to expand Benoit's initial framework into sport as well as examining the implications for public relations and image repair strategies.

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"This is not a race, this is a farce" was a comment made by Minardi team owner Paul Stoddart during a live interview with Australian media during the 2005 United States Grand Prix (Stoddart, 2005). The crisis that occurred at this race unfolded live for the entire world to see. The subsequent public relations crisis management actions were necessarily a public event. The events that transpired differ from traditional image restoration studies in both context and substance.

Formula One (F1) is the most technologically advanced and financially lucrative form of motorsport in the world (see Collings, 2001; Hotten, 2000). Running races in countries all across the world (e.g., 17 races in 2007), F1 attracts audiences in the billions of viewers over the course of a season. As Steve Matchett (2005), longtime Benetton Formula One team mechanic and current commentator for Speed Channel's Formula One broadcasts, said that, since the sport's inception in 1950, "it has grown to become one of the leading sports/businesses in the world, a colossal multi-billion-dollar industry" (p. 22). Although most races are run in Europe, the sport has pushed into new markets in the last ten years. The sport returned to the United States in 2000 after a long hiatus and the United States Grand Prix is run annually at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (IMS). The United States is an important market for F1 as the U.S. offers a significant television package for advertising and for sponsorship considerations and allows access to a large automobile market for the auto manufacturers involved in F1 (FIA Friday, 2006; United States Grand Prix, 2006; United States Grand Prix—Facts and Figures, 2003).

The crisis that took place at the IMS from June 15, 2005 to June 19, 2005 is a useful study for public relations and crisis management scholars as the multiplicity of stakeholders in the situation could offer lessons for any corporate/organizational environment where multiple partners or relationships occur (e.g., mergers, joint ventures). In addition, the image restoration actions taken in this case for public relations purposes were played out through the media to the fans, and not solely for

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the media members themselves. In this instance, the racing public needed to be dealt with immediately: many fans were in attendance, and millions more watched on television. Racing fans maintain the sport and, thus, attract sponsors who provide money for teams to race. The media were used by corporate rhetors to address racing fans and how they did so is an important lesson for public relations practitioners. Personal interviews, memoranda, and other methods of information distribution were used by the stakeholders to communicate to the public through the media and to offer *apologia*, or a defense of the stakeholders' actions and character.

Hearit (2006) attributed the rise in corporate apologia over the years to several factors. First, because of the social unrest of the 1960s, he argued that corporations learned that public opinion was an important factor upon which to keep a strategic eye, especially as mistrust of corporations grew. Second, he attributed the increasing importance of corporate apologia to changes in the media, such as the explosion of media outlets (e.g., television) and the media's appetite for corporate malfeasance news that frames the situation as a "good versus evil morality drama" (Hearit, 2006, p. 14). At the same time, corporate entities began to understand the ways in which they too could use the media to promote their apologia messages in the face of opposition, criticism, or crisis situations. Third, rising consumerism means that the corporations "have no other choice but to acquiesce to customer demands" (Hearit, 2006, p. 14). Fourth, he pointed out that corporations spend billions of dollars in promoting marketing messages to consumers and realized the need of keeping their name in a positive light and working to ensure their message being heard above all others. Finally, when economic conditions worsen, closer attention is paid to corporate activities and there is a concomitant increase in the need to confront charges (accurate and not) of corporate malfeasance.

The Indianapolis tire crisis reflects several of these trends; corporate entities with substantial investments in the economics and the image of Formula One and the fans (i.e., consumers) watching around the world (via media and at the track) required action (an explanation) as to why the race was run with only six cars. This crisis highlights Hearit's discussion of organizations' need to use apologia as the situation includes not only the traditional organization–consumer relationship, but also the inclusion of suppliers/partners that do not have significant opportunities to act on their own in the crisis situation. For example, a technology partner on a Michelin tire team was not consulted as to the events leading up to the decision to pull the Michelin cars off of the track, yet they are an important part of the overall team and Formula One infrastructure.

In response to the rise in corporate apologia and crisis management, the role of public relations is to identify, respond to, and mitigate negative actions or activities with the goal of repairing a public image or returning a public image to its pre-crisis level (Fearn-Banks, 2007; Hearit, 2006). Public relations efforts in crisis situations were described by Seeger, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2000) as being a "fundamental process to mitigating harm, responding to stakeholder needs, and repairing an image following an organization crisis" (p. 155). The crisis situation that occurred at Indianapolis in 2005 required multiple stakeholders to concurrently plan, prepare, and conduct public relations efforts addressing multiple constituents. In a case such as this, the public relations efforts during and after the crisis would come from Formula One (as a single entity) and be directed towards the fans, both in attendance and watching live on television around the world. However, Seeger et al. (2000) distinguished between communication strategies and public relations strategies saying the latter "focus more on timing, feedback, flexibility, and making contact with all stakeholders" (p. 161). Given the multi-leveled and interconnected nature of the stakeholders (Formula One teams, tire companies, and administrative bodies), each also focused much of their crisis management strategy on the other stakeholders in addition to the racing public at large.

In addition to different levels of stakeholders in a crisis, there are also different kinds of crises. Although Hearit (2001) discussed four different types of wrongdoing in crisis communication and public relations research (scandals and illegalities, accidents, product safety incidents, and social irresponsibility), he also questioned whether the four areas were "exhaustive enough to apply to all apologetic discourse and whether certain types of apologetic contexts tend to result in specified communication choices" (Hearit, 2001, p. 510). The crisis at Indianapolis contributes to this ongoing discussion as the context can be described as the prevention of a crisis that caused a crisis; a category that has some grounding in the four areas Hearit described, but does not fit entirely into any one of them. Further, Seeger et al. (2000) believed that "the organization's overall goal is to move beyond the crisis as quickly and thoroughly as possible while maintaining economic viability and social legitimacy" (p. 162). What, then, happens when the organization is not a singular entity, but a collection of individual entities with their own agendas and goals? The implications of such a crisis for public relations literature is to highlight the importance of concurrently evaluating all stakeholders in the situation in an effort to better understand the public relations choices made by each at a particular time. This approach might indicate whether organizations or individuals use specific approaches or actions at specific points in time (Hearit, 2001). Moreover, public relations activities can be used to change opinions, but full image repair work goes beyond simple persuasion.

In order to explain the evolving role of public relations and image restoration in crisis contexts, this paper provides an analysis of how the teams, Michelin, the Federation Internationale De L'Automobile (FIA; the sport's governing body), and Formula One Management (FOM; the commercial rights company that produces the races) prepared and enacted public relations strategies in reaction to the crisis. As such, we seek to examine public relations strategies and crisis situations in an integrated and holistic manner. First, we discuss the crisis at IMS that demanded a public relations response. Second, we examine Benoit's image restoration strategies as an analytical framework for this study. Last, we evaluate these strategies in relation to the events at the 2005 United States Grand Prix and offer implications for public relations.

To examine the stakeholders' public relations strategies, image repair discourse was assembled from several important archives of F1 news, statistics, and historical information. Websites, including www.formula1.com, www.fia.com, www.grandprix.com, and www.f1-live.com, were the primary sources of archived material on the crisis. The first website is the sport's main site, the second is the website of the sport's governing body, and the last two are news and archive

websites affiliated with F1. Additional information came from the archives of team websites, such as www.renaultf1.com, and the sport archives of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC, www.bbc.com). In total, 131 articles were found. Information consisted primarily of accounts, commentary, and memoranda about the crisis.

Close textual analysis (Black, 1965; Leff & Mohrmann, 1974; Slagell, 1991) was used to examine the documents to understand how the event unfolded, how the crisis was viewed by various parties, and to separate gossip from actual events. Such a focus allows for both humanistic and content analyses of the situation to be conducted simultaneously and to complement each other in an analysis of a crisis situation. Benoit's typology of public relations measures and image repair strategies (e.g., Benoit, 1995a) was used due to its conceptual breadth and applicability to multiple situations that call for *apologia* (Benoit, 1997). Benoit (1997) explained that effective image repair discourse "is a form of persuasive discourse. . .[and] multiple strategies can work together" (pp. 183–184). The conclusions found as a result of this investigation are an exemplar of public relations persuasion efforts involving multiple strategies used by multiple stakeholders/protagonists in such a crisis. Such interconnectivity in organizational relations during crisis situations is important as the recent Chinese-made pet food or toothpaste contamination scares have shown (China probes, 2007).

1. Literature review

The situation at IMS is an example of crisis communication and public relations by organizations. During a crisis, an organization must respond to the situation in both public and private ways, and how organizations respond is the focus for much of the image restoration literature (e.g., Benoit & Brinson, 1994; Huxman & Bruce, 1995), including instances where crises might come as a surprise to the stakeholders involved by the nature of the event (Fearn-Banks, 1994). However, corporations are not the only entities in need of image restoration strategies; often, a crisis situation will involve an individual or individuals responding to a crisis (Benoit & Brinson, 1999). This situation also requires a public relations response strategy to aid the individual (e.g., Benoit & Hanczor, 1994; Benoit & Nill, 1998). Crisis management is of concern to the field of sport. The literature has generally focused on preparing guidelines or models for sport organizations to enact in times of crisis (Bacon & Anderson, 2003; O'Beirne & Ries, 1999). Other guidelines involved legal aspects of a crisis situation and the implications they have for an organization (Altman, 2005). Studies which examine crisis responses in sport broaden these perspectives and include Wenner's (2004) examination of the Janet Jackson crisis at the 2004 Super Bowl and Peters and Pikkemaat's (2005) analysis of a 1999 Alpine disaster in Gaultier, Austria.

Over time, different models have been developed to examine crisis situations (Benoit, 1995a; Coombs, 1995; Fearn-Banks, 2007; Fink, 1986; Hearit, 2006; Seeger, 2002; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002) and corporate issues management (Heath & Ryan, 1989; Nelson & Heath, 1986). Some crisis management models (e.g., Coombs, 1995; Coombs & Holladay, 2002) adopt a situational approach to understand a crisis situation, claiming that the crisis determines how individuals should respond. Seeger and Ulmer (2002), however, proposed that re-thinking crises offers "an opportunity to replace the discourse of apology and defense with a more optimistic discourse of rebuilding and renewal" (2002, p. 127). Hearit and Courtright (2003) argued that crises should be considered socially constructed events and evaluated the 1986 crisis involving Audi's 5000 model as an example how alternatives to a situationalist approach can be used. Others have proposed a re-thinking of crisis communication study entirely by adopting a post-modern viewpoint that breaks away from traditional conceptualizations of crises (i.e., linearity in events) and strives to "encourage mitigation of suffering, facilitate polyvocal responses to crisis, and foster attention to internal dissent as a stimulus to organizational change and self-awareness" (Tyler, 2005). Recently, Coombs (2007) recognized that rhetorical case studies of crisis situations have "awakened us to the need to focus on what organizations say and do as well keyed us to the value of the situation in influencing crisis responses" (p. 136), but also cited a need to "embrace the evolution of the field and influx of empirical studies of crisis communication" (Coombs, 2007, p. 136). In addition, technological advancements in the past ten years have driven the need to examine the role of mediated technologies (e.g., the internet) in public relations and crisis communications contexts (Taylor & Kent, 2007). As a blend of situational and social constructionist approaches, Benoit (1995a, 1997) presented a widely used framework that provides a clear, broadly applicable typology that fits well with public relations analyses of crisis situations (see Seeger et al., 2000). In many ways, Benoit follows Coombs' earlier model by focusing "largely on reputational protection and defense" (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002, p. 128), but Benoit also gives the rhetor a role in constructing the situation. Benoit's (1995a) five strategies include *Denial*, *Evasion of Responsibility*, *Reduction of Offensiveness*, *Corrective Action*, and *Mortification* with each of these five main strategies is comprised of further sub-strategies (see Table 1).

Table 1
Benoit's image repair strategies

Main strategy	Secondary		Strategies			
Denial	Simple denial	Shifting the blame				
Evasion of responsibility	Provocation	Defeasibility	Accident	Good intentions		
Reduction of offensiveness	Bolstering	Minimization	Differentiation	Transcendence	Attack accuser	Compensation
Corrective action						
Mortification						

Source: Benoit (1995a, p. 95).

Benoit's typology will be used in this examination of the Formula One crisis at Indianapolis. His framework has recently been applied in corporate crises such as AT&T efforts to deal with a widespread long distance service interruption (Benoit & Brinson, 1994) and Sears' response to accusations that its service centers were over-charging customers for repairs (Benoit, 1995b). Analyses such as these (see also Benoit, 1995a, 1997) apply Benoit's typology to singular corporate events and the public relations efforts by the corporations to identify successful responses and mistakes made by a company during and after a crisis situation. More specifically, Benoit (1995a) called for the application of his framework to athletics (also see L'Etang, 2006 for public relations research and sport).

2. The controversy at Indianapolis

During Friday practice for the sixth annual United States Grand Prix, two Toyota team drivers crashed their cars, one crashing at over 150 mph into the wall of the race track, as their rear Michelin tires appeared to tear apart. The next day, qualifying for the race took place and all Michelin runners qualified their cars without further incident. Michelin engineers were unable to explain what happened to the tires during the Friday session.

To compensate for their failure to identify the cause of the trouble, Michelin suggested that speeds be reduced in the corner (turn 13), speed limiters be activated at the turn, and/or that IMS should build a chicane to effectively turn the corner into an "S" where drivers would slow down. Given the difficulties of enforcing these ideas, concerns about contravening sporting rules, and realistic concerns regarding safety, none were implemented. Michelin also suggested that an alternative Michelin tire be used and the FIA suggested Michelin teams make multiple pit stops to change tires, but both ideas appeared to provide an advantage to either Michelin or Bridgestone teams.

On race day, Michelin teams (West McLaren Mercedes, Mild Seven Renault F1, BMW Williams F1, Sauber Petronas, Red Bull Racing, B.A.R. Honda, and Panasonic Toyota Racing) pulled into the pit lane at the conclusion of the warm-up lap leaving only three teams (Ferrari, Jordan, and Minardi) to line-up on the starting grid and take the green flag. As stunned fans looked on, the race became official after two laps and an announcement regarding the situation was made over the public address system. Fans began to catcall and throw objects onto the track. The race ended with the two Ferrari cars finishing in first and second place as they completely outclassed the other runners. During the podium celebration, the winners were subdued and only third place Jordan driver Tiero Montego cheered as it was his first ever podium and he was going to enjoy it, controversy or not. Stakeholders in the crisis, however, had nothing to enjoy.

3. Image restoration discourses at the United States Grand Prix

During the IMS crisis, four organizations were required to act. Interestingly, F1 had precedent for making changes to a race track or tires in a crisis (A couple of things to consider, 2005). What made this crisis situation different from these previous cases?

3.1. Primary image restoration discourses

As the crisis involved a number of different stakeholders (see Table 2), it is important to differentiate the levels of impact the situation had on these organizations. The FIA, the governing body for the sport, and Michelin were most severely impacted and are classified as the main protagonists in the crisis situation, but other stakeholders were also affected.

3.1.1. Federation Internationale De L' Automobile

The response by the FIA to the crisis is an example of how organizations can direct multiple public relations and image restoration strategies at different constituents at different points in time. The FIA's response also points to Hearit's discussion of the individual/organizational dilemma in analyses of organizational crisis response. The FIA responded to the crisis through the use of multiple strategies including *Reducing the Offensiveness of the Act* (both by *Transcendence* and *Attacking the Accuser*), *Compensation*, and *Mortification* (i.e., outright apology). A *Transcendence* strategy is one where the "the act is placed in a

Table 2

Formula One stakeholders at the 2005 United States Grand Prix

Michelin teams	Bridgestone teams	Formula One Management Association	Federation Internationale De L' Automobile	Indianapolis Motor Speedway
West McLaren-Mercedes	Scuderia Ferrari Marlboro	Bernie Ecclestone	Max Mosley, President	Tony George, Owner & CEO, IMS
Mild Seven Renault F1	Jordan Grand Prix		Charlie Whiting, Race Director	Joie Chitwood, President, IMS
BMW WilliamsF1 Team Sauber Petronas Red Bull Racing B.A.R. Honda Panasonic Toyota Racing	Minardi			

different context” (Benoit, 1995a, p. 77), while *Attacking the Accuser* is used to reduce the credibility of the other party with the hope that “the damage to one’s image from those accusations may be diminished” (Benoit, 1995a, p. 78).

In a press statement from the FIA, *Transcendence* was used to claim it was the FIA’s duty to uphold the rules of the sport. The FIA stated, “Formula One is a sporting contest. It must operate to clear rules. These cannot be negotiated each time a competitor brings the wrong equipment to a race” (Michelin teams summoned, 2005, p. 3). Max Mosley, the FIA’s president, personally appealed to a higher order of values through *Transcendence* by discussing the rules. A focus on the rules became a staple of Mosley’s defense of the FIA’s actions (see Q&A with Max, 2005, p. 2).

The FIA’s press release further explained how they attempted to help Michelin alleviate the problem by offering to monitor speeds in the turn, but suggested Michelin wanted the FIA to break the rules by having the teams using Bridgestone tires also slow their turn 13 corner speeds (*Attack the Accuser*). The press statement claimed Michelin had damaged the sport and that any changes to the track would contravene the sport’s rules (FIA stress, 2005). Mosley said, “It seems the Michelin teams failed to bring a back-up tyre as usual [per regulations] with them to Indianapolis” (Reaction to the US GP farce, 2005, p. 1) and went on to state that, although the FIA (FIA stress, 2005) provided different options for Michelin, the tire manufacturer refused to accept any of them.

The FIA then released copies of letters sent between Michelin and FIA Race Director Charlie Whiting to the public. These letters also focused on the rules. Michelin’s initial letter after the Friday practice session stated that they “have been unable to identify a root cause [of the tire failures]” and that Michelin teams were told that speeds in turn 13 needed to be reduced (Correspondence between representatives, 2005, p. 1). In a reply to Michelin’s disclosure that their tires were unsafe, Whiting once again raised the lack of race preparation by Michelin (Correspondence between representatives, 2005, p. 2). Whiting further employed *Transcendence* when he explained that using tires other than those used in qualifying “would be a breach of the rules to be considered by the stewards” and that the penalty “would have to be heavy enough to ensure that no team was tempted to use qualifying tyres in the future” (Correspondence between representatives, 2005, p. 4). Raising the issue of fair play, Whiting said that changing the race course configuration because of Michelin’s failure to bring proper equipment would be unfair to other, more prepared teams (Correspondence between representatives, 2005, p. 5).

The FIA employed strategies to buttress *Attacking the Accuser* and *Transcendence*. Mosley made unusual use of Benoit’s *Compensation* and *Corrective Action* strategies. In these strategies there is “remuneration to the victim” (1995a, p. 78) and a commitment to correct the problem, respectively. Mosley suggested that fans who turned up at the US Grand Prix should be reimbursed by Michelin and that Tony George (IMS President) and Bernie Ecclestone (then the Formula One commercial rights holder) should accept 2005 race tickets at the 2006 race (Michelin should reimburse, 2005, pp. 1–2). Finally, the FIA engaged a *Mortification* (and blame) strategy when they apologized to the fans in attendance and again attacked Michelin for damaging the sport (Michelin teams summoned, 2005, p. 8). When questioned about Michelin becoming scapegoats for the crisis, Mosley (2005) replied, “They are not the scapegoats. They are responsible” (Federation Internationale de L’Automobile, 2005, p. 19).

3.1.2. Michelin

Michelin adopted a similarly complex response to the crisis. However, the company was placed at the center of the controversy and their responses offer an example of how organizations can interact with and respond to each other in an organizational network during a crisis. First, Michelin sought to *Reduce the Offensiveness* through *Transcendence* and to *Evade Responsibility* by *Shifting the Blame*. By *Shifting the Blame*, Michelin would argue “another person or organization is actually responsible” for the crisis, not them (Benoit, 1997, p. 180). Michelin also attempted to utilize *Corrective Action*. Finally, they apologized for the incident, a *Mortification* strategy.

Michelin attempted to *Reduce the Offensiveness* of the crisis by employing *Transcendence* and appealing to higher considerations, in this case, safety. Commenting on Michelin’s actions, the deputy director of competition, Frederic Henry-Biabaud, said “We proposed realistic and feasible alternatives” (FIA stress, 2005, p. 1).

Michelin continued to *Shift the Blame* to the FIA for not supporting any of Michelin’s proposed alternatives. Michelin released a statement claiming, “Had our ideas been followed, we could have guaranteed driver safety, the participation of our teams and added interest for the public” (Michelin apologise, 2005, p. 4), hinting the FIA, by not accepting these ideas, is responsible for the crisis. Interestingly, Michelin received support in *Shifting the Blame* from a competitor who used Bridgestone tires. Paul Stoddart, owner and team principal of Minardi, had been fiercely critical of Max Mosley in the past and sided with Michelin in this instance. Stoddart said, “this idea [addition of a chicane] was rejected by FIA president, Max Mosley. . . the teams were told that, should this occur, there would be no race” and stated that the situation was part of a continued pattern of political behavior in Formula One (Minardi’s view, 2005, p. 2).

Unable to identify the cause(s) of the accidents, Michelin further vowed to continue investigating. This is evidence of a *Corrective Action* strategy designed to “solve or prevent [the] reoccurrence of [a] problem” (Image Restoration Strategies, 2005, p. 1). Although Michelin never completely explained the cause of the tire trouble, Michelin did create a plan with the IMS to refund the spectators.

3.2. Secondary image restoration discourses

In addition to the two principals, other stakeholders responded to the crisis. Although they were not the major figures, they were affected by the dynamics of the situation. This section examines the responses of the individual Michelin teams,

IMS, Bridgestone and its teams, and Formula One Management. These organizations, while affected by the crisis, are not necessarily cited as being responsible for the crisis. In fact, the non-Michelin teams are involved in a related, yet separate, organizational network with the Michelin teams. Examining their responses to the crisis not only broadens public relations analyses into crisis situations, it is instructive as to the nature of *third parties* perceived to be involved in crisis situations. These parties take the forms of individuals who “insert themselves in the role of ‘victims’” (Hearit, 2006, p. 84) such as a group claiming that the actions of an unrelated party affected them as well. In addition, there are observers who “write or produce commentary about the actions of wrongdoing on the part of guilty parties and then propose public social sanction against them” (Hearit, 2006, p. 84). Finally, a third party might take on the role of an apologist who “run[s] to the defense of the accused and offer[s] an explanation that accounts for the wrongdoing” in an effort to support the individual or organization under scrutiny (Hearit, 2006, p. 84). At Indianapolis, the third parties took the form of the IMS, the fans, and Bernie Ecclestone of FOM. Each staked out their claim within the crisis: the IMS played the part of victim alongside the fans and Ecclestone that of a pundit commenting on the situation. Each, however, refused to share blame or the crisis limelight as they hurriedly departed the scene as the crisis unfolded. Much of the third party interactions take place through the media. Hearit (2006) also believed that crisis events are mediated because “observers increasingly become participants as they *experience (in original)* or participate in rituals through the media” (pp. 34–35).

3.2.1. Michelin supplied teams

While Michelin and the FIA bickered, the seven Michelin-shod teams that did not race were caught in the middle of the accusations. Responsible to the FIA and contractually bound to Michelin, the teams were in a difficult position. Their first action was *Evading responsibility through provocation*. Provocation is a strategy where the “act in question was performed in response to another wrongful act, which understandably provoked the offensive act in question” (Benoit, 1995a, p. 76). A statement released by the teams as a response to the situation said they “deeply regret the position that they have been put in today” by Michelin and the FIA and proceeded to apologize to the fans and sponsors (Joint statement, 2005, p. 1).

For the teams, the decision to race or not was difficult because they “were advised by Michelin that none of the tyres that were available to the teams could be used unless the vehicle speed in turn 13 was reduced” (Joint statement, 2005, p. 2). The teams understood that Michelin could not guarantee the safety of the tires unless changes to the circuit were made. Despite their misgivings, the Michelin-supplied teams released a statement demonstrating a sense of unity by expressing their willingness to use a chicane and to forfeit any championship points (Joint statement, 2005). The teams believed, if the changes were accepted by the FIA, the race could have continued as planned. Since they were not accepted by the FIA, the teams simply could not race because of safety concerns.

Despite the show of solidarity with Michelin, an undercurrent of *Shifting the Blame* from the teams back to Michelin can be seen. The statement the teams released may have *Shifted the Blame* to Michelin because the teams said that they were acting under orders from Michelin not to race. In addition, the teams deferred to Michelin’s judgment and indicated that they acted in the name of safety (*Transcendence*) (The Michelin teams, 2005). The teams consistently expressed sentiments similar to those of Nick Fry, then Technical Director of the B.A.R. team, when he said safety “is always the first concern of any team and the FIA. Regrettably, the teams were obliged to follow Michelin’s requirements not to race” (Michelin teams talk, 2005, p. 5). Interestingly, Fry positioned the FIA as sharing concerns for safety despite Michelin and the teams blaming the organization for the crisis. Martin Whitmarsh of the McLaren-Mercedes team said, “I don’t know what more the Michelin teams could have done to get a race on safely. . . We offered everything but sadly for the fans it did not happen” (Reaction to the US GP farce, 2005, p. 1). David Coulthard, a driver for the Michelin-shod Red Bull Racing team placed the blame on both Michelin and the FIA. He said, “the bottom line is that Michelin screwed up, but after that the FIA had in their hands the ability to make sure that a race took place” (Reaction to the US GP farce, 2005, p. 1).

3.2.2. Indianapolis Motor Speedway

The IMS began its public relations campaign by using *Mortification* and *Shifting the Blame*, and by *Evading Responsibility* via the *Defeasibility* claim. *Defeasibility* is when one claims a “lack of information about or control over important factors in the situation” (Benoit, 1995a, p. 76).

A statement issued from Tony George, the owner of the IMS, paired *Mortification* and *Shifting the Blame*. He said, “the Indianapolis Motor Speedway shares in the disappointment with the loyal fans of IMS and Formula One that we did not see the exciting race we all anticipated due to circumstances beyond our control” (Indianapolis statement, 2005, p. 1). George blamed the entire cast of Formula One characters for the events at the race. He “suggest[ed] the fans who wish to make their feelings known” and proceeded to list the addresses of Michelin, the FIA, and Formula One Management (Indianapolis statement, 2005, p. 1). George expressed *Defeasibility* when he stated that the IMS was as disappointed as the fans due to “circumstances beyond our control” (Cavin, 2005, p. 28). When asked about the future of Formula One at Indianapolis, Joie Chitwood, president of the IMS, claimed that both the IMS and the fans were victims of someone else’s mistakes (Cavin, 2005; Indianapolis unsure, 2005).

3.2.3. Bridgestone and Bridgestone supplied teams

The Bridgestone supplied teams (Ferrari, Jordan, and Minardi) and Bridgestone itself were relatively silent. Bridgestone representatives merely said they were pleased with the performance of their tires and teams. Post-race comments by Ferrari indicated *Denial* and *Shifting the Blame* strategies. Jean Todt, team principal at Ferrari, said, “I am very surprised by the

situation that arose today, but would prefer not to comment on things that are not directly my responsibility” (United States GP – Sunday – Team Quotes, 2005, p. 3). Both Ferrari drivers utilized *Transcendence* when they expressed sympathy for the fans. Seven-time World Champion Michael Schumacher, who claimed his first victory of the season, said, “I suppose it was not the best way to take my first win of the season and it was sad for the fans. But I am glad to see so many of the Ferrari supporters stayed to the end to see how this strange race would end” (United States GP – Sunday – Team Quotes, 2005, p. 3). He went on to utilize *Defeasibility* when he was quoted as saying “the situation we had today was out of our hands. . . But I do know that we left at home tyres that had more performance and less durability, but we and Bridgestone made our choice knowing how much stress there is here on the tyres” (United States GP – Sunday – Team Quotes, 2005, p. 1). His teammate, Rubens Barichello, said, “this was a sad day for the race fans and it was also sad to see the other cars pull into the pits, but I guess their problem must have been a serious one” (United States GP – Sunday – Team Quotes, 2005, p. 2).

3.2.4. Formula One Management

Bernie Ecclestone, then head of FOM, is a powerful figure in the sport and long-time friend and colleague of FIA president Max Mosley. Ecclestone was quiet during most of the controversy, having left the race before it was finished to avoid media and fan scrutiny. He did lay the blame at the door of the teams, however, saying that he was “furious with the stupidity. There should have been a compromise. I tried a million things, but the teams had other ideas” (Reaction to the US GP farce, 2005, p. 1). It is uncertain as to whether Ecclestone meant the Michelin and/or Bridgestone teams in his comment.

4. Conclusions and implications for public relations analyses of image restoration strategies and crisis management activities

This study offers a complex set of circumstances that highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the image restoration and public relations strategies used by organizations in crisis management.

4.1. Conclusions of the study

Examining the crisis at Indianapolis provided a number of important findings that highlight the importance of a broader approach to crisis management and public relations strategy study. First, this situation illustrates the potential interplay of multiple stakeholders acting in a crisis situation. In this case, Formula One is a single organization comprised of several, smaller organizations; organizations which are separate, yet connected. Through the various strategies employed at Indianapolis, it is clear that meta-organizational unity can be sacrificed for individual organizational purposes. The various individual stakeholders used strategies to their own advantage, but never attempted display a *Formula One solidarity* in the face of conflict. Rather, the fractured message sent by Formula One proper makes the successful communication of an image repair or public relations strategy more difficult. Moreover, contradictory or misaligned messages sent by various parties within an organization might make a unified message nearly impossible, thus increasing the likelihood of further damage to their collective reputations.

Second, the insular nature of the Formula One crisis response exemplifies the ways in which image repair strategies can be used as a political tool beyond re-building customer goodwill. Michelin might have used the crisis as an excuse to leave Formula One (see Cortes, 2005). In fact, Michelin has withdrawn from F1 in protest of the FIA's new rules requiring the use of a control tire for the 2007 season. Perhaps emboldened by the power it displayed during the Indianapolis race crisis, the FIA has been able to push through several questionable rule changes in the post-crisis period. The teams, many of whom have been fiercely critical of Mosley, used the crisis to lambaste the FIA president for a number of issues including the constant rule changes in the name of cost reduction. The teams argued that Mosley's efforts are wasted and the new rules increase costs. The FOM has also come under fire from the teams seeking to wrest more revenue from the organization. The crisis provided an opportunity for the teams to restate their case on a global platform rather than in press releases.

Third, with respect to Formula One fans, the consistent use of *Shifting the Blame* strategies by all organizations involved made it difficult for the stakeholders to acknowledge the racing fans' anger over the situation. This strategy also highlighted the difficulties inherent with placing blame on an individual versus or in addition to an organization. Hearit (2006) also discussed the multiple publics that are affected by an organization's crisis situation. These include “enabling (e.g., governmental), functional (e.g., employees, suppliers, and customers), normative (e.g., trade associations and professional associations), and diffused (e.g., media and communities)” publics (Hearit, 2006, p. 41). The need to potentially address multiple publics at one time makes it difficult for organizational members to craft a single response message in a crisis, resulting in “conflicting choices” (Hearit, 2006, p. 42). In this instance, the organization known as Formula One did not present a unified strategy to deal with the crisis. This lack of unity made responding to different publics and stakeholders a difficult task to accomplish successfully. Only the IMS representatives consistently put the fans first during the fallout period. The reliance on blame shifting strategies in this case indicates that organizations have the potential to focus on themselves in a crisis and forget the other, public stakeholders to which their public relations strategies should appeal.

Finally, this situation also raises the question as to whether responsibility falls on individuals or organizations in crisis management situations. Hearit (2001) discussed how organizations are comprised “of large numbers of individuals, but they are much more than aggregates of the individuals” (p. 509). Moreover, organizations are legally treated as “individual social actors” (Hearit, 2001, p. 509). As he described the social ritual that is apology, one of the main difficulties of a crisis situation

that Hearit (2006) cited is determining where responsibility lies. Cases of individuals involved in crises are clearer in their attribution of blame/responsibility than those involving organizations. Although an individual is generally held responsible for his or her actions, “organizations are structurally evasive when confronted with the question of their guilt” (2006, p. 22), such as in the case of the Ford Pinto (see Ermann & Lundman, 1992). Since organizations function as interconnected systems, Hearit (2006) argued that “decisions are not and cannot be located in individuals. As a result, there is a sense that no one person is responsible” (p. 23). Even those in positions of power, such as managers, cannot be entirely blamed for actions of their subordinates. This situation makes it increasingly difficult to ascribe blame to one person or put in one place, and, “if all actors are culpable, then it is difficult for any actors to be culpable” (Hearit, 2006, p. 24).

This point is evident in the Indianapolis case. Tensions between individual and organizational culpability were raised. The FIA was not blamed so much as its president Max Mosley was, but Michelin received a great deal of criticism while individual members of the racing division, including its highest level management, were not often addressed individually. The FIA blamed Michelin, Michelin blamed Mosley, the fans blamed everyone, and so forth. Does the dominance of a personality, like Mosley, in an organization make a difference in crisis management outcomes or stakeholder perceptions of responsibility? Benoit’s framework accounts for public relations and image repair strategies taken, but does not address the power differences among stakeholders and the way in which an individual can shape non-organizational members’ views of the organization. Further, although one could assume that Mosley’s identification with F1 would push him to value the sport as a primary focus, his willingness to attack and blame key stakeholders rather than work with them and keep disagreements private indicates a need for analysts to take a closer look at the organizational members in addition to the actions taken in a crisis.

4.2. Future research

Future research can examine and build upon important aspects found in this particular crisis situation. First, the wider public relations issue at work in this crisis analysis is the occurrence of a crisis that stemmed from the prevention of another crisis. When Michelin decided to inform their teams that the tires would be unsuitable for racing, they attempted to head off a potentially deadly crisis (an accident), but, in its place, created an unintended crisis when the race was conducted with only six cars. Generally, crisis situations are a case of individual/organization doing wrong and addressing those directly harmed. Crisis situations, however, can be multi-layered and dynamic, thus reminding public relations scholars of the need to pay careful attention to the dynamism and contextual factors of crises and to not assume current incidents require the same rhetorical choices as previous incidents that appear similar. Further, it is generally assumed that crisis situations require an apology or acceptance of culpability by those involved. Hearit (2001), however, suggested that the nature of crisis response and their timing are variable. Future research can examine instances where the use of *apologia* and other public relations and image repair strategies are not so clear-cut. In addition, crisis contexts can arise in which the decision to reveal information and apologize is not a straightforward issue. Specifically, Hearit raised the distinction between “an apology as a statement of concern or regret and a formal acknowledgement of culpability” (Hearit, 2006, pp. 55–56). He added that a corrective strategy must be used in situations where organizations wish to avoid direct responsibility but face the need to act. The Indianapolis crisis showed that this tension was in action; certain protagonists, such as the Bridgestone teams and Bridgestone itself, decided not to engage the crisis or draw themselves into it. They did utter statements that expressed concern over the situation, but these actors stopped short of placing blame. Further, the FIA followed a similar strategy in that they expressed regret to the fans, but revealed their actions (corrective and otherwise) leading up to the start of the race in an effort to avoid blame and culpability. This seemingly contradictory message, in this case, appeared to convince no one of the FIA’s innocence.

Second, this crisis also reminds public relations scholars that not all image repair strategies are conducted by a single actor. Future research can also be conducted into the nature of organizational relationships in crisis situations. Organizations, even those within larger relationships, contractual or otherwise, can consciously put their own interests ahead of the group to minimize the impact of negative situations. This is why most organizations have some form of public relations and crisis management manual and why scholars continue to stress the importance of such precautions (e.g., Fearn-Banks, 2007).

A third area of future research lies at the intersection of liability, image, and organizational practices and relationships. The interactions among these areas offer an intriguing area of study for public relations scholars and practitioners as they consider broader constituents in future crisis analyses. The actions taken in one crisis might limit future individual or organizational actions in subsequent crises and/or with selected (or all) constituents. Similarly, the choices made at a moment in time (see Hearit, 2001), might constrain subsequent actions within the same crisis. For example, once an organization has adopted one strategy, it might be unable to reverse a course of action because of the negativity caused by a reversal of this statement. Public relations scholars and practitioners must understand the immediate effects of a particular public relations strategy and examine short-term goals as they enable and constrain long-term image repair and public relations possibilities. This need is especially true in cases where organizations are continuously making public responses to charges of wrongdoing (e.g., European banking firms and Nazi-era gold) that could lead to contradictory or conflicting actions and/or messages.

Fourth, as indicated earlier, the crisis also calls into question the completeness of Hearit’s four different types of wrongdoing that can occur: accident, scandals and illegalities, product safety incidents, and social irresponsibility (2001, p. 510). In this case, the prevention of further on-track accidents created an unintended storm of controversy as the race unfolded. However, which of the wrongdoings occurred? The accident was not the type associated with corporate industrial or other types of accidents (e.g., Exxon Valdez). Two accidents did take place, but these accidents were within a context where they

are expected, as racing is inherently dangerous. There was no scandal or illegality, although political maneuvering in the aftermath of the crisis could be interpreted as approaching scandalous. The safety of the product in question was linked only to the racing tires and had no effect (from Michelin's manufacturing perspective) on the road tires they made or any other form of racing tire. Finally, the protagonists claimed they were taking proper responsibility by the actions they took, so social irresponsibility was not an issue. Hearit (2001) called for research to determine "whether this category system is exhaustive enough to apply to all apologetic discourse" (p. 510). The results of this case indicate that the answer is no. The multiple stakeholders, interconnectedness/separateness of the protagonists, and the lack of a catastrophe all point to the need to broaden the public relations definitions of *wrongdoing*. In this case, the situation that occurred might be unique to sport, but elements of the responsibilities and interrelationships among protagonists can be seen in the recent recalls in the food and toy industries. These situations involve a number of players that are separate, but related by production, contractual, and other obligations. The ungrateful partner, not willing to tell the public the same story in the midst of a crisis, can radically alter a carefully planned public relations campaign conducted by its partners.

5. Post-race, post-crisis fallout

In the weeks following the race, the FIA summoned the seven Michelin teams to a special hearing conducted by the World Motor Sport Council on Wednesday, June 29, 2005. The World Motor Sport Council found the Michelin teams guilty of bringing the sport into disrepute. The teams' punishment was delayed until later in the year and very little came of it. A secret meeting between Mosley and two team bosses took place in Monaco and the charges were dropped based upon evidence brought by McLaren boss Ron Dennis and Red Bull Racing's Christian Horner.

And just like that, it was over. The crisis passed and the next United States Grand Prix ran on July 2, 2006. A new spirit of cooperation permeates the Formula One paddock. The billion dollar question is *for how long?*

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