Confessions of Journalism's Old Gray Lady: Deceptive Reporting at the New York Times

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Confessions of Journalism's Old Gray Lady: Deceptive Reporting at *The New York Times*

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In May of 2003 one of the most respected periodicals on the planet, The New York Times, ran a front page 14,000 word apology in the Sunday Times, for fallacious reporting conducted by Jayson Blair. In his four year tenure at the Times, Blair falsified sources, lied about conducting interviews, and erroneously reported on important details of some of the nation’s top stories. After a widespread investigation into Blair’s stories by other Times reporters, journalism’s old grey lady was forced to face the public and provide them with answers, an explanation, and an apology for this breach of trust.

This study uses the work of William Benoit and Susan Brinson as a framework to analyze the Times’ image restoration strategies employed in its apology. This paper will add to the tremendous amount of image restoration literature as well as demonstrate the need for more research of this kind focused on the print media industry.

This study finds that The New York Times’ May 11, 2003 apology did adhere to the image restoration strategies offered by William Benoit and Susan Brinson. The study also proves that, since stock prices and subscription rates for the publication were virtually unaffected following the apology, the Times’ response was effective at restoring the public’s trust following this transgression.
CHAPTER ONE: PURPOSE OF STUDY

A wealth of communication research exists concerning effective image restoration strategies. However, little of this research provides a framework for the print media to follow when trying to restore a tarnished image following a transgression. Members of the print media often need to make corrections for inaccurate reporting, and therefore a set of guidelines for them to follow is essential. This study does not seek to offer new strategies for media organizations to employ. Rather, it seeks to highlight the effectiveness of other proven image restoration strategies that media members would do well to use following a crisis.

This study examines the case of the intentional reporting deception on the part of former New York Times reporter Jayson Blair. Blair concocted stories from interviews he never conducted and wrote of landscapes he never visited. When Times readers began to notify the paper about Blair’s erroneous reporting, the well-respected paper acknowledged that in some cases, other staff members knew of Blair’s deceit and chose not to fire him because no one at the Times wished to tarnish the career of a promising young reporter. So grievous were his errors that The New York Times was forced to run a full-page apology and explanation on the front page of a 2003 Sunday edition of the Times. The Times largely tried to paint itself and the rest of its employees as victims of Blair’s deceit. However, since the Times has admitted that it knew of some of Blair’s deceitful acts and continued to employ him anyway, the paper cannot cast all of the
blame on Blair while portraying itself as spotless. Regardless of whether Blair or the
*Times* was actually at fault, this example will provide for an analysis of appropriate
apologia and image restoration strategies that a publication can use when confronted with
a similar situation. Ultimately, this study will provide answers to the following questions:

1. Did the response strategies offered by *The New York Times* concerning the
   Jayson Blair incident conform to the suggestions offered by William Benoit and Susan Brinson?

2. Were the response strategies offered by *The New York Times* concerning the
   Jayson Blair incident effective at restoring the publication's favorable standing among other periodicals?

This study is warranted because, due to its worldwide publication, not only is *The
New York Times* a respected publication worldwide but it is also a multinational business
corporation. Therefore, the conclusions drawn from this study are germane to the
newspaper industry as well as to all multinational corporations. Essentially, this study
applies to all businesses seeking to regain legitimacy and public trust following a
wrongdoing, regardless of their primary function.

In addition, several studies have proven that cheating in the workplace is on the rise, and this example of workplace fraud clearly reflects the growing national trend (Nichols, 2003). By examining the damage that workplace cheating bestowed on *The New York Times* and the steps that the paper had to take in an attempt to overcome its tarnished image, workplaces in similar situations can learn how to adequately control incidents similar to that which *The New York Times* was forced to undergo.

Similar occurrences of a respected publication being betrayed by one of its reporters have occurred in the past. In 1980 Janet Cooke, a respected reporter for *The
Washington Post, won a Pulitzer Prize for her expose entitled “Jimmy’s World.” In her story, Ms. Cooke described Jimmy, an eight-year old boy who, as Cooke claimed, was addicted to heroin. The story was part of an assignment in which Janet Cooke was to discuss drugs and inner city black youths in the Washington D.C. metro area. However, as King (1985) notes, soon after this story’s publication, Washington D.C. officials asked Ms. Cooke to help them locate Jimmy so that they could get him off of the streets and into a foster home. When the reporter refused, city officials and executives at the Post became suspicious. Eventually, Cooke admitted that she had simply made up the story, and apologized for the fabrication. While this example does seem similar to the deceit that The New York Times was forced to deal with as a result of Jayson Blair’s false reporting, one major difference remains. While Cooke’s betrayal of The Washington Post happened only once, Jayson Blair repeatedly fabricated stories and lied to the Times over a four-year period of time. The frequency of Blair’s deceit forced The New York Times to issue an unprecedented apology for this irresponsible behavior.

While similar research does exist concerning deceitful reporting on the part of a newspaper, few publications have ever had to take such drastic measures of apology as The New York Times was forced to do in May of 2003. Papers of all sizes commonly make mistakes when reporting facts and are often forced to print a correction in a subsequent edition. Jayson Blair left behind him an extremely long trail of inaccurate and fabricated reporting that demanded much more than a sentence-long correction. The magnitude of the response on the part of the Times makes this study a worthwhile endeavor.
Ironically, the exposure of Jayson Blair’s erroneous reporting came in the same year that The New York Times received a record seven Pulitzer prizes. Thus, this incident was particularly embarrassing for the Times and caused many of its readers to question just how accurate the publication’s previous reporting actually was. In previous years, the Times has made reporting errors, such as claiming that Fidel Castro was an anti-communist in the 1950s, and more recently, publishing a series of questionable stories concerning wars in both Iraq and Cambodia. Because many other news sources as well as loyal Times readers have long been questioning the publication’s credibility, the Jayson Blair incident was certainly a blemish on the integrity of the Times. The Times’ response to this exposure of deceit required that the paper print a full-page, 14,000 word apology to its readers in an attempt to restore reader loyalty and trust. All of these factors prove the uniqueness of this particular situation, and justify a study of this nature.

This study will employ the work of William L. Benoit and Susan L. Brinson, entitled “Apologies Are Not Enough” as a framework for analysis. The scholars present a typology of several broad discursive image restoration strategies, making this an ideal methodology for this situation’s analysis. This study will begin with a review of relevant literature concerning apologia/image restoration strategies, followed by a detailed summary of the tenants that Benoit and Brinson claim are necessary in order for a corporation to effectively restore its validity and credibility. After outlining Benoit and Brinson’s image restoration strategies and applying this methodology to the apology offered by The New York Times, this study will provide answers to the aforementioned questions and discuss which apologia/image restoration strategies might have universal applicability in cases of deception.
Crises are certainly terrifying events for any individual or corporation to go through, but they are often unavoidable. A crisis poses a threat to a corporation’s legitimacy. Therefore, an organization must carefully decide how it will respond to this crisis in order to best maintain its legitimacy among stockholders and especially the general public. This study can add to the wealth of image restoration/apologia research currently available. I have chosen to analyze the rhetoric employed by The New York Times because doing so will open the door for corporations accused of wrongdoing to discuss tactics that they might wish to employ once a transgression takes place for which they must answer. As numerous studies have proven, maintaining a positive image and a sense of legitimacy is a goal that all corporations must strive to attain if they desire to be successful. The more literature they have available to help discern appropriate image restoration strategies, the more effectively they can plan their response should they find themselves accused of a wrongdoing. Another unique characteristic of such a study is the fact that a number of previous studies have analyzed the response strategies of corporations suddenly accused of inappropriate behavior. Many of them even discuss transgressions on the part of television journalists. However, very few of these studies address inappropriate behavior as it applies to the print media. Perhaps this study will not only provide members of the print media a resource to consult when formulating a response strategy following an accusation of wrongdoing but also go one step further to encourage additional research in this lacking area of communication studies.

Chapter two provides a review of literature relevant to image restoration. Chapter three discusses the methodology for this study as well as an overview of the Jayson Blair case. The analysis of The New York Times’ response is found in Chapter four.
five provides an evaluation and discussion of the study, and Chapter six concludes the study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Credibility/Legitimacy Literature

Communication scholars and philosophers alike have long recognized the integral role that credibility plays to an individual or corporation (McCroskey and Teven, 1999). Schweiger (2000) claims that, “Credibility is a variable attributed to communicators by recipients. One can only consider a medium as more or less credible (p. 39).” Credibility is the level of trust that a receiver has for the originator of a message. McCroskey and Teven (1999) note that in order for a persuasive appeal to be effective, the audience must consider the organization making the appeal to be trustworthy. They state that one of the best ways for an organization to achieve trustworthiness or credibility in the audience’s eyes is to demonstrate that it understands its audience. The scholars claim that, “Understanding is knowing another person’s ideas, feelings, and needs (p. 92),” and that this principle holds true whether it is being applied to an individual or a large group of individuals. The scholars go one step further in offering advice for achieving a trustworthy status, by discussing the concept of empathy. Empathy and understanding are different, according to the scholars, because empathy, “…involves behaviors indicating that one person not only understands the other’s views, but accepts them as valid views, even if he or she does not agree with those views (p. 92).” Empathy, unlike understanding, does not simply involve knowing another person’s ideas and views, but
accepting them as legitimate ideas, regardless of whether or not one agrees or disagrees with the views in question.

Scholars have long agreed that an accusation of wrongdoing puts an organization’s credibility in jeopardy, thus demanding the corporation’s response. Hearit (1994) discusses the goals of an organization accused of a transgression:

An organization charged with wrongdoing seeks to accomplish three objectives. First, it attempts to present a convincing and plausible description of the situation in which the wrongdoing allegedly occurred that offers a competing narrative to the one commonly reported. Second, to diffuse the anger and hostility directed at the company, the organization issues a statement of regret that expresses concern but acknowledges minimal responsibility. Third, the organization engages in dissociation to remove the linkage of the organization with the wrongdoing. (p. 115).

Engaging in the above behaviors can help to reestablish or maintain an accused organization’s credibility. Sellnow (1993) echoes this sentiment, claiming, “Not only must an organization respond quickly to an event that it could not or did not foresee, it must do so while under the pressure of an imposing loss of profit, legitimacy, or both (p. 30).”

Metts and Cupach (1989) note that often a threat to a corporation’s reputation or credibility results from embarrassment that an individual or a corporation experiences. The scholars state that:

Embarrassment is a frequent and uncomfortable consequence of social interaction.

In short, embarrassment is a particular kind of social predicament characterized
by an inconsistency between the manner in which a person actually behaves and the manner in which he/she would have liked to behave. (p. 151).

This definition of embarrassment indicates that this feeling is a product of a social interaction. However, *The New York Times* carries on a discourse with its readers daily, as it prints information for the readers and allows its readers to offer feedback in the way of editorials. Therefore, the *Times* does indeed conduct social interactions with its readers. The Jayson Blair incident thrust the paper into an embarrassing social predicament, and one that the paper’s publishers felt warranted an extensive apology to maintain credibility.

Benoit (1997) notes that individuals or corporations accused of wrongdoing are subject to embarrassment because of an attack by another party. He claims that two criteria must be met in order to have a legitimate attack. First, the attacking individual or party must hold the accused responsible for an action, and second, the action itself must be considered offensive by the attacker. Benoit claims, “...the key question is not if the act was in fact offensive, but whether the act is believed by the relevant audience(s) to be heinous (p. 178).” The scholar goes on to claim that whenever a corporation’s image is threatened due to an attack by another individual or group of individuals, the attacked corporation must determine how it will go about rebuilding its credibility, or in other words, restoring its image.

Any time a source suffers embarrassment due to an attack, its credibility is likely to suffer as well. Consider Sternthal, et al. (1978) who say that, “… a communicator’s character has a significant effect on the persuasiveness of their appeals. (p. 285).” Bennett (1981) studies this idea of the importance of character when examining
presidential candidates on the campaign trail. He notes that, "The attention of the press and public seems to shift from the monotony of the campaign to any activity that represents a departure from the routine" (p. 310). A politician’s character can come into question whenever he or she participates in something out of the ordinary. Yoon et al. (1998) claim that, "... a highly credible source is more effective than a less credible source in causing positive attitude change and behavioral intentions" (p. 155). In essence, all of these scholars believe that for the public to take an individual or organization seriously, that individual or organization must be credible. The next logical assumption is that an embarrassing revelation about an individual or organization such as The New York Times damages that individual or institution’s credibility, and the individual’s or the corporation’s message will not be taken as seriously. Thus, it is integral that an organization maintains a favorable image among its public, and when damage to this credibility occurs, the organization must correct its adverse effects as soon and efficiently as possible in order to maintain credibility.

Williams and Moffitt (1997) note that contrary to popular belief, corporate image is not completely controlled by the organization itself but rather that controlling an image also lies in the hands of the general public. Therefore, a corporation must concern itself with how it is viewed by the public at large, and never is this more true than during Times of corporate crisis. Apologia and image restoration tactics often seek to restore legitimacy to a corporation or individual following a transgression. Scholars Allen and Caillouet (1994) argue that one of the greatest challenges that a corporation faces is impression management, or consistently presenting itself in a positive light to the general public. The scholars argue that maintaining a sense of legitimacy or validity is a difficult
task even for organizations that have been widely recognized or supported in the past. Due to its longevity and enormous number of subscribers, *The New York Times* is clearly a widely recognized and supported organization, one that must concern itself with maintaining a sense of legitimacy. Burkholder (1991) echoes this sentiment, noting that following an attack on one’s character, such as the attack on *The New York Times’* character, the individual or corporation suffering the attack must repair their reputation.

Because the shaping of a corporation’s image lies with the public, the organization in question must maintain a favorable standing with its public. This favorable standing is largely dependent on the legitimacy of an organization. Hearit (1995) defines organizational legitimacy by noting:

> Corporate social legitimacy theory argues that corporations exist in a state of dependency upon their environments and, hence, can only survive to the extent that they can convince their social environment that their use of exchange power is ‘rightful and proper’ (p. 2).

A crisis, such as the one that *The New York Times* recently faced, can forever alter an organization’s image. Massey (2001) notes that organizations share a relationship with their stakeholders and that, “One such relationship involves the development of legitimacy” (p. 153). Massey continues to state that, “During crisis situations organizations can experience a loss of legitimacy if their actions no longer conform to what is considered to be appropriate organizational behavior” (p. 154). Or, as Hearit (1995) illustrates, “Corporations charged with wrongdoing often face social legitimation crises” (p. 3).
Elsbach and Sutton (1992) note that one important tactic a corporation may use in maintaining a favorable and legitimate standing with its public is to shift the attention away from the controversial actions that took place and instead focus on the desirable goals that the corporation shares with its public. They argue that a corporation has a responsibility to conform to the ideas and goals held by the majority of its public to be considered a legitimate and respected organization. As Elsbach and Sutton state, “... if such organizations openly violate societal norms, they are more likely to be noticed, but outsiders are unlikely to provide endorsement and support to organizations that defy widely accepted standards for behavior” (p. 699-700).

Coombs (1995) notes that how an organization communicates with its public has profound importance following a crisis of any significance. As Coombs states, “Communication shapes public perception of a crisis and the organization involved in the crisis” (p. 447). Therefore, how an organization responds following an organizational tragedy is of the utmost importance in restoring its image and maintaining legitimacy. “One of the primary objectives of crisis management is to maintain an organization’s image—the public perception of the organization” (p. 448). King (1985) notes that this maintaining of an organization’s image becomes quite a challenge when that organization happens to be a news publication. He notes, “…to justify actions when the charge is fabrication is difficult to accomplish for the media, which has been entrusted to tell the public the ‘truth’” (p. 21).

When a corporation suffers a charge against its credibility or legitimacy, it must regain that legitimacy. Some scholars refer to this process as re-legitimation. Hearit (1995) helps readers to understand the necessity of re-legitimation. “The re-legitimation
of an organization is the primary motivation for a corporate response to a charge of wrongdoing” (p. 6). Many scholars agree if an individual or corporation can convince their audience that a transgression was not their fault, or that the transgression is not worthy of condemnation, then the individual or corporation can successfully repair any damage that may have been suffered as a result of the transgression. For example, McClearey (1983), claims that a speaker decides that if the audience comprehends his or her motives or actions, then the audience will be unable to condemn the speaker. Although McClearey was discussing public speaking forums, since The New York Times sought to communicate with as broad an audience as possible when offering its apology for Jayson Blair’s deceit, the scholar’s concept is clearly applicable to this scenario.

**Image and Image Restoration Literature**

A corporation’s image is crucial to that corporation. Benoit and Brinson (1994) claim that image may be defined as a representation of the reality of a company’s performance, and that this reality is largely constructed by the public. They define image as “...the perceptions of the source held by the audience, shaped by the words and acts of the source” (p. 75-76).

Treadwell and Harrison (1994) recognize the important role that image plays for a business organization. While credibility takes into account the perceived trustworthiness of an individual or group, the scholars define image as shared knowledge about a person or organization. In essence, image is a combination of all of the shared knowledge about an organization, and thus, image includes credibility. The scholars explain that, “Image is often used to refer to representations of an organization that exist for an external public” (p. 63). Brinson and Benoit (1996) define image as, “…the perceptions of the
rhetor held by the audience, shaped by the words and deeds of that rhetor, as well as by
the actions of others” (p. 30). Obviously, individuals and corporations desire a positive
image for themselves or their businesses. Moffitt (1994) points out that, “An
organization assumes that a positive corporate image in the eyes of the consumer leads to
customer sales” (p. 41). These scholars join a number of other scholars advocating the
important but often overlooked role that image plays in an organization. A favorable
image will present the corporation positively to the general public, whereas a negative
image can be extremely detrimental to a corporation’s well being. Thus, it is crucial that
any business seeking to reach the largest number of people possible must maintain a
positive image. Bolz (1989) claims that one necessary step toward maintaining a
favorable image in the mind of the public is for a corporation to keep open its lines of
communication with its audience. As she states, “An on-going dialogue with the external
environment upon which organizations depend to function is essential” (p. 14).

While corporations and communication scholars alike will agree that it is crucial
for organizations and individuals to maintain a positive image in the eyes of the audience,
Treadwell and Harrison (1994) point out that image among employees, as well as among
the public, has critical impact for a corporation. They claim that:

Organizational image is important to organizational functioning for two reasons.
First, images are thought to be related to members’ and non-members’ affective
and behavioral responses to the organization. Images provide information about
the character of organizations and are thus likely to be important in eliciting and
maintaining the allegiance of members, potential members, and those who are
partially involved… Second, similar images or the sharing of an image by
organizational members can be important to organizational maintenance and functioning. (p. 64).

The scholars are advocating the idea that a corporation’s image can affect the way members (employees) respond to that organization. They note that organizational members need to share a view of that organization among one another. When this image is a negative one, production will likely be negatively affected. Thus, while a corporation must be concerned with what its public thinks about it, it must also concern itself with how corporate insiders view it.

Upon finding itself accused of a wrongdoing, an individual or organization’s image will likely suffer as a result. The accused must then attempt to repair or restore a positive image among audience members. Communication scholars have long been interested in strategies of image restoration following a wrongdoing or crisis either on the part of an individual or a corporation. Coombs and Schmidt (2000) define crises as, “...events that threaten to damage the reputation of an organization” (p. 165). Fink (1987) defines an organizational crisis as:

...a situation that runs the risk of escalating in intensity, falling under close media or government scrutiny, interfering with the normal operations of business, jeopardizing the positive public image presently enjoyed by a company or its officers, and damaging a company’s bottom line in any way. (p. 15-16).

When a corporation’s image comes under attack by a third party, its ability to function as an efficient and effective business may likely suffer. Marcus and Goodman (1991) claim that following an attack or an accusation of wrongdoing, corporations generally take one of two diverse approaches toward image restoration. The first is one
of accommodation, in which the accused essentially offer an apology for any wrongdoing. On the opposite end of the spectrum are the individuals or corporations that answer accusations with a denial of any wrongdoing, or a denial of responsibility for a noted wrongdoing. The scholars illustrate these two approaches by discussing Chrysler Motor Corporation CEO Lee Iacocca, who apologized on behalf of Chrysler executives who were indicted for rigging certain Chrysler models with disengaged odometers in the 1980s. Conversely, the scholars outline the case of a Union Carbide plant located in India that in the late 1980s suffered a gas leak that lead to the deaths of thousands of people in the area. Union Carbide’s CEO Warren Anderson flew to Bhopal, India following the incident, and, “…offered a theory of sabotage as a defense and denied that it (Union Carbide) had any responsibility for the tragedy” (p. 282). Ultimately, as a result of its negligent actions, the company paid $470 million to the victims living in Bhopal (Bolz, 1989).

Coombs and Schmidt (2000) provide a typical example of corporate image restoration. Coombs and Schmidt discuss the instance in which several Texaco executives were allegedly captured on tape using racist language in 1996. The tape also reportedly contained plans for Texaco executives to destroy evidence related to a separate racial discrimination lawsuit that was pending against the company. The scholars note that in this particular instance of image restoration, Texaco used a combination of communication strategies as a means to help repair its image, including reminding the general public of Texaco’s policy against discrimination, offering an indication of an investigation into the allegations, identifying the problem as a result of bad employees and not the corporation as a whole and, ultimately, admitting guilt and apologizing for the
racist comments. By using this combination of strategies Texaco was able to make amends for any wrongdoing in the eyes of the public at large.

One of the most commonly employed image restoration tools is apologia. In attempting to clearly define the concept of apologia, Downey (1993) argues that apologia is perhaps the most widely used genre of rhetoric. The scholar claims that:

...apologetic discourse may be defined as a speech of self-defense... not so much on an individual’s policies or ideas, but on her/his character or worth...

Precipitated by motives ranging from self-actualization to social repair to survival, rhetors respond to threats against their moral nature, motives, or reputation. (p. 42).

The scholars never claim that apologia has to consist of the accused apologizing for a wrongdoing. In essence, apologia is merely a response to a tragedy, and not an apology, although apologia may very well contain an apology. Hearit (1994) expands on this idea.

An individual must keep in mind that, “An apologia is not an apology (although it may contain one), but a defense that seeks to present a compelling, counter description of organizational actions” (p. 115). In essence, Hearit claims that apologia does not have to contain an apology, but that it must seek to neutralize any negative claims made against an organization or individual following a wrongdoing. Hearit (1996) elaborates, saying, “...apologia is a response to a public relations crisis that features an ethical charge” (p. 235). Ryan, (1982) claims that, “As a response to the accusation, the apology should be discussed in terms of the apologist’s motivation to respond to the accusation” (p. 254).

Apologia, then, can be understood as response to an attack on a corporation, whether that corporation is guilty of the claims made against it. It is a responsive strategy that a
corporation employs to repair its image, maintain credibility, or prevent damage to its image following a transgression. Clearly, this concept of an individual or corporation responding to a threat against their reputation is the case when examining the apology that *The New York Times* offered its readers in 2003 following the deception on the part of one of its reporters, Jayson Blair.

Ohbuchi et al. (1989) offer a similar definition. They claim that apologia generally comes as a form of defensive impression management that normally occurs when the accused finds itself in an unfavorable social predicament. The scholars claim that an apologia will “...convey any one of the following responses to the victim: a reduction of the victim’s responsibility, respect for the victim, denial of maliciousness, and a restoration of social justice” (p. 219). Hearit (1994) notes an additional function of apologia as it pertains to media coverage of a transgression. Apologiae “...deprive journalists of a continuing story and, thus, limit the damage done to corporate images” (p. 122). Thus, when an individual or organization offers an explanation for deviant behavior, negative reporting about that organization becomes ineffective. For the purpose of this study, one can understand apologia as a form of image restoration characterized as a response to an unfavorable accusation. Among other goals, apologia seeks to restore credibility and legitimacy, reopen lines of communication between the accused and the audience, offer an explanation for a transgression, or place blame for a wrongdoing.

Scott and Lyman (1968) note that following a crisis, in order to maintain or restore legitimacy, a corporation will often offer an explanation to the general public for the unanticipated behavior. Many scholars call such an explanation an account. It is
important to note that an account is not necessarily an apology, since an account simply
offers an explanation for deviant behavior, but does not necessarily offer a direct apology
for that behavior. However, it is crucial to mention and understand accounts when
discussing apologia, because most of the time an apology will generally also offer an
explanation of the unanticipated behavior. In essence, offering an account is one aspect
of apologia. Takaku et al. (2001) note that “...most researchers regard accounts as a
form of strategic communication, which are motivated by the instrumental concerns of
evading punishment or obtaining favorable reactions from others” (p. 144). They go on
to note that the usefulness or effectiveness of accounts depends on whether they appear
trustworthy and sincere to the audience. If used effectively, the offering of an account
can be an extremely beneficial tool for an individual to use during conflict resolution.

Riordan et al. (1988) offer a clear definition of an account. These scholars claim
that there are two types of accounts. The first classification is the offering of excuses.
“Actors offering excuses admit that the act was wrong or inappropriate, but deny full
responsibility” (p. 496). The other type is justification. “Actors offering justification
accept responsibility for the action but attempt to change how the act or its consequences
are viewed by characterizing the act in a more positive light” (p. 496). It is important to
note that in neither of these classifications do the scholars state that seeking to make
amends for a transgression takes place. This fact proves helpful in clarifying the
difference between a simple offering of an account and an outright use of apologia.

Schonbach (1990) claims that an integral part of this explanation must anticipate
and answer the audience’s questions about the errant behavior and simultaneously control
the audience’s perceptions of a situation and the organization involved. Riordan et al.
claim that for an explanation or account to be effective in restoring an audience’s trust in an individual or organization, that explanation must seem believable. In other words, it is important for the individual or corporation offering the apology to do so in a sincere manner, with no hint of ulterior motives that the public could cite as a reason not to accept or approve the explanation or apology.

Gonzales (1992) expands upon this idea of offering an explanation. The scholar claims that often when individuals say or do something that they wish they had not, these individuals will offer accounts, or tactics to salvage their social identities. McLaughlin, Cody, and O’Hair (1983) claim that “Accounts have been around almost as long as sin has been around” (p. 208). Gonzales notes that often these accounts will include concessions, which may include an assumption of personal responsibility or an expression of embarrassment. Also accounts will include excuses, or a denial of full responsibilities due to a lack of intent or foreseeability. Clearly, the situation with The New York Times involves the organization having gone through circumstances that it wishes it had not, and their issuance of such blatant corrective tactics displays the organization’s offering of an account or explanation of sorts.

Hale (1987) expands on the idea of offering an excuse or explanation as part of an account sequence following an individual’s or a corporation’s failure to live up to the expectations of others, as The New York Times did with the Jayson Blair incident. According to Hale “An excuse involves the admission that a failure has occurred coupled with the claim that the particular individual involved is not fully responsible for that failure event” (p. 119). Kernisky (1997) agrees, noting that following a noticeable transgression, the public expects an organization to accept responsibility for its actions.
The scholar goes on to note that not accepting responsibility and placing the blame elsewhere is likely to backfire on an organization that finds itself accused of a wrongdoing.

Benoit and Shirley (1997) posit that a corporation accused of wrongdoing has a responsibility to preserve its integrity, or “save face.” The scholars offer several widely employed examples of image restoration tactics that corporations frequently use. They illustrate that the strategies that are generally the most effective include offering an apology as an admittance of wrongdoing and then offering a subsequent corrective action to account for and make amends for the initial wrongdoing. Benoit (1995) notes, “Clearly, image repair for both individuals and organizations is an important and pervasive phenomenon” (p. 89).

Hearit (1997) claims that one strategy corporations employ when engaging in apologia is transcendence. In defining transcendence, Hearit explains, “…transcendence is a form of symbolic action whereby a corporation redefines its acts so that they are viewed from a larger context, one that customarily features an ethical dimension” (p. 220). Hearit further explains this idea, saying, “When applied to apologetic situations, a transcendent appeal responds to a charge—and potential guilt—through a strategy of transformation” (p. 221). When using transcendence, an individual or organization neither admits guilt nor offers an explanation for a deviation from the norm. Instead, it seeks to move beyond the action in question and force the public to view the actions of the organization as a whole.
Brinson and Benoit (1996) note that often the best strategy for an organization to use once a wrongdoing has occurred is to admit the fault on its part and take the necessary steps to make amends. They claim that:

If there appears to be clear evidence of wrongdoing, and if the blame cannot be shifted elsewhere, the accused will probably benefit from effective and appropriate corrective action...It appears as if a corporation best serves itself when it takes responsibility and acts accordingly. (p. 39).

Brinson and Benoit conclude by noting that the worst option for a corporation accused of wrongdoing to engage in is to attempt to hide the wrongdoing. They claim that secrecy about an occurrence implies that the corporation might have something to hide. The scholars also advocate the use of honesty. They note that when the general public receives confusing and often conflicting messages from the accused, the organization is likely to suffer more embarrassment and damage to its image than it would have had it just been honest and not tried to hide any information from the very beginning.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND OVERVIEW

Case Background

As indicated earlier, in 2002, The New York Times received a record-breaking seven Pulitzer Prizes, which, to those working in the journalism profession, is the highest honor one newspaper could ever hope to achieve. Eisner (2003) notes that receiving so many Prizes in one year fortified The New York Times' place on the Mount Olympus of journalism. The Times stood as a model of credibility and success in journalism that all other publications could only hope to imitate.

For 107 years the front page of The New York Times has included the slogan “All the News That’s Fit to Print.” Among the notable news stories of the past few years was the “Portraits of Grief” series. This feature, which lasted several months, was a collaborative effort among Times reporters to honor and remember each of the victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. One reporter, Jayson Blair, was excused from this assignment, and with good reason. Since Blair’s cousin had supposedly been killed in the attack on the Pentagon, this 27-year old reporter knew that working on a story about the victims of September 11 would simply be too painful for him to bear. Consequently, he was relieved of his responsibilities for this assignment.

However, Blair is not related to the person who died. And, as it turns out, this was not the first time that Blair deceived both the publication and its readers in order to benefit himself. As reports of fabricated stories began to pour into the Times, editors
soon discovered that he had also recently falsely described a visit to former prisoner of war Jessica Lynch’s home in West Virginia. Blair wrote of her home overlooking tobacco fields and cattle pastures. The truth, however, is that Lynch’s family home was nowhere near any type of field (Nichols 2003). Such blatant disregard for the truth prompted the *Times* to launch a widespread investigation of Blair’s deceit. As top-ranking editors at *The New York Times* became aware of Blair’s deception in the Lynch instance, they began to notice other areas in which Blair was evading the truth, and in doing so, his own responsibility as a reporter for one of the most respected and widely-read publications in the world. In fact, at the conclusion of the investigation, *The New York Times* was forced to cope with the fact that out of 73 reports filed in his last 8 months with the paper, 38 had proved unreliable (Eisner 2003). The realization that Blair had left behind him a seemingly endless trail of deceit forced *The New York Times* to issue a 7,500-word response to its readers. The response was a mixture of acknowledgement of the wrongdoing, as well as an explanation for its initial occurrence. The *Times* also reminded its faithful readers of its longstanding commitment to excellence in journalism, and it also assured readers that the proper steps had been taken to insure that such an occurrence would not take place again.

**Method and Analysis**

This study employs the work of Benoit and Brinson (1994) and Benoit (1995). After providing an in-depth outline of the communication strategies which, according to Benoit and Brinson, are effective in repairing a damaged organizational image, each of these strategies will be applied to the response offered by *The New York Times* as a result
of Jayson Blair’s deception as a way to discern the strengths of the *Times*’ response as well as its weaknesses.

Benoit and Brinson’s work serves as an excellent tool for evaluating the effectiveness of the *Times*’ response. The scholars discuss the response strategy of AT&T after its long distance service interruption in New York in September of 1991. Much like *The New York Times*, initially AT&T offered similar response strategies including mortification, correction, and bolstering. Ultimately, AT&T offered its customers a full-page newspaper apology and explanation, just as *The New York Times* did in May 2003. Benoit and Brinson carefully outline and evaluate the effectiveness of the response strategies on the part of AT&T. Since such a clear evaluation is available for a similar situation, coupled with the similarity in response strategies on the part of AT&T and *The New York Times* following major wrongdoings, this case study will serve as an appropriate tool for evaluation.

Benoit’s solo work also serves as a useful tool for evaluating the paper’s response because in addition to the strategies offered by Benoit and Brinson, Benoit’s work discusses two additional strategies often used in image restoration attempts. His discussion of the tactics of denial and evasion of responsibility is relevant to this study, as a careful analysis reveals that *The New York Times* also engaged in both of these strategies in its image restoration attempt.

Benoit and Brinson (1994) claim that during its crisis, AT&T offered three image restoration tactics as a means to restore its image and regain legitimacy. The scholars begin by discussing the strategy of mortification then move on to correction before finally explaining bolstering. Each of these strategies will be outlined thoroughly in this
study. Definitions of these techniques as offered by communication scholars other than simply Benoit and Brinson will also be discussed to present the most comprehensive definition for each strategy.

The first of these strategies is mortification, in which the responsible party acknowledges the transgression and makes no attempt to minimize its effects. Next, the scholars discuss the concept of correction, whereby the responsible party reveals plans to correct the problem. Bolstering is a strategy in which a corporation accused of a wrongdoing seeks to promote its positive image among the audience members. Each of these three strategies will be discussed in great detail in this study.

This study also considers Benoit’s (1995) strategy of denial, in which the offending party denies any responsibility for a transgression. Benoit discusses the tactic of evading responsibility, which occurs when the accused minimizes its responsibility for the offending event. After discussing all five of the strategies, this study demonstrates how The New York Times employed each of these techniques in response to the revelation of deceptive reporting on the part of a former employee.

Following this demonstration, the effectiveness of each strategy employed by The New York Times is discussed. This study examines factors such as the response of other national and regional newspapers to The New York Times’ image restoration strategies. Also, it evaluates factors such as subscription rates and stock prices of the Times following the apology. By evaluating the impact that the image restoration attempt had on investors, customers, and other newspapers, this study demonstrates the effectiveness and appropriateness of The New York Times’ response to the Jayson Blair incident. The
study concludes with a discussion of any limitations, as well as suggestion for future communication research of this kind.

Outline of the Work of Susan Brinson and William Benoit

Image Restoration and Crisis

Massey (2001) notes that organizations share a relationship with their stakeholders and that “One such relationship involves the development of legitimacy” (p. 153). Massy continues, stating that, “During crisis situations organizations can experience a loss of legitimacy if their actions no longer conform to what is considered to be appropriate organizational behavior” (p. 154). Hearit (1995) illustrates this loss of legitimacy, suggesting, “Corporations charged with wrongdoing often face social legitimation crises” (p. 3). Because The New York Times deviated from what most would consider appropriate organizational behavior as a result of the Times’ admitted wrongdoing, then one can assert that the Jayson Blair incident did indeed threaten the legitimacy of the organization.

After an organization finds itself in the throes of a crisis, as did The New York Times as a result of deceitful reporting on the part of one of its employees, that company must evaluate the damage done to its reputation and seek to make amends with the general public for any wrongdoing that has threatened that corporation’s legitimacy. Farrell and Goodnight (1981) note that following a crisis, rhetors speaking on behalf of an organization will immediately begin the search for the right response to a tragedy. Once The New York Times became aware of the potential damage that Jayson Blair’s dishonesty could do to the publication, it sought to formulate a response that would both attempt to explain the paper’s actions as well and improve its tarnished reputation among
the public. By evaluating this response, an individual or organization that finds itself in a crisis can develop response strategies to help overcome any damage done to its public image.

However, before one can take an accurate look at this instance of image restoration involving *The New York Times*, one must first prove that it is, in fact, an example of an organizational crisis. Ray (1999) defines a crisis as “... an unpredictable event which disrupts an organization’s routine pattern of day-to-day life” (p. 13). Certainly, then, one can effectively argue that the day-to-day operations of the *Times* were indeed disrupted by their obligation to respond to Jayson Blair’s erroneous and deceitful reporting. Adding further proof to this categorization, Ray goes on to note that, “A crisis tends to be triggered by organizational errors, oversights, or deficiencies” (p. 13-14). More specifically, she notes that, “A crisis is normally the result of false assumptions, poor communication, cultural lag, and misplaced optimism” (p. 14). By these standards one can undoubtedly refer to the incident in question as a crisis because in its response, *The New York Times* admitted that in large part, Blair’s false reporting continued for so long as a result of oversights and miscommunication between management and staff at the paper.

Adding weight to this argument is Fink (1987), who, in the previously offered definition, notes that when a crisis occurs it not only disrupts the normal operations of an organization but can also jeopardize the positive image it enjoys among its public. From Fink’s explanation, one can infer that an organization’s legitimacy is at stake whenever it is forced to undergo a crisis. Coombs and Schmidt (2000) define a crisis as an event that threatens a corporation’s image. Massey (2001) makes this point more clearly, noting
that a corporation does indeed experience a loss of legitimacy at the hands of an organizational crisis. Coombs (1995) notes that of ultimate importance following an organizational crisis is how that organization works to maintain and preserve its image. Therefore, one can indeed claim that the false reporting conducted by Jayson Blair did catapult *The New York Times* into the middle of a crisis, and also that this crisis was one that could have potentially been extremely detrimental to the reputation of this respected publication.

With the establishment of the Jayson Blair incident as an example of organizational crisis, one can now begin to evaluate *The New York Times' response to this crisis. To do so, one must first garner a thorough understanding of the image restoration strategies advocated by Benoit and Brinson as well as those championed by Benoit.

**Mortification**

First, Benoit and Brinson discuss the strategy of mortification. They claim that the accused organization makes no attempt to minimize the impact of the transgression. Often, according to Benoit and Brinson (1994), the strategy of mortification will involve an explicit apology for any wrongdoing on the part of an individual or a corporation. In essence, "The apologist accepts responsibility, acknowledges the suffering of the victims without attempting to diminish the undesirable consequences they suffered, and directly apologizes for the offensive act" (p. 81). Benoit (1997) summarizes even more clearly the strategy of mortification, noting that in employing this strategy, the party responsible for the transgression will, "…confess and beg forgiveness" (p. 181). Coombs and
Schmidt (2000) claim, “Mortification has the organization take responsibility for the crisis and issue an apology” (p. 164).

Burke (1973) notes that mortification must contain both a confession on the part of the offending party and a request for forgiveness from the injured audience. Benoit (1995) claims that mortification is different from other forms of image repair in that the accused accepts responsibility for his or her unpleasant actions and apologizes, while other forms of image restoration find the accused party attempting to distance himself or herself from blame. Burke states that mortification is useful in proving to an audience that an apology is sincere. Benoit and Brinson (1994) state that, “…the act of mortification conveys a strong sense of security. It is neither easy nor pleasant to confess responsibility for the suffering of others” (p. 83). Because admitting a wrongdoing is difficult, as the scholars claim, a statement of apology is more likely to appear honest and trustworthy to the target audience. If audiences believe that the offending party is sincere in its apology, then they will be more likely to pardon the wrongful act, thus restoring the favorable image of the offender.

Coombs (1995) offers a detailed description of mortification. He claims that the first step is for an organization to offer repentance. In essence, during this phase of mortification, the accused organization apologizes for the offense. He notes that “Repentance involves asking for forgiveness” (p. 452). Coombs goes on to state that “The negatives associated with the crisis should be lessened as people accept the apology and forgive the organization for its misdeeds.”

To illustrate the use of mortification, Benoit and Brinson (1994) discuss how AT&T admitted wrongdoing following the service blackout in New York in 1991. First,
according to the scholars, Robert C. Allen, the Chairman of AT&T, began a message to
the public by stating that he was deeply disturbed that AT&T was responsible for such a
widespread disruption in its communication service. By explicitly accepting
responsibility for this wrongdoing, he made no attempt to minimize the impact of the
service outage or AT&T’s role in it. Chairman Allen went on to acknowledge the
tremendous expense of the service disruption, as well as its effect on peoples’ personal
lives. As the scholars note, the first paragraph of this apology ends with Chairman Allen
apologizing to everyone who was affected by this outage either directly or indirectly.
According to Benoit and Brinson, “This could be considered a textbook example of
mortification” (p. 82).

Correction

Next, the scholars illustrate the image restoration strategy known as correction.
Simply put, correction involves a company’s revelation of its plans to correct a problem
and insure that it does not happen again. Brinson and Benoit (1996) note that through
correction, the rhetor promises to correct the problem, whatever it may be. Benoit (1997)
claims that, “This action can take the form of restoring the state of affairs existing before
the offensive action, and/or promising to prevent the recurrence of the offensive act” (p.
181). Benoit and Brinson (1994) claim that typically during correction, the accused party
must first identify the cause of the problem before it can begin to take corrective action.

Benoit (1995) notes that unlike mortification, correction does not necessarily have
to consist of an acceptance of responsibility for a transgression. The scholar illustrates
the utility of taking corrective action, stating, “When those accused of wrongdoing
demonstrate their willingness to correct or prevent recurrence of the problem, their
reputation may improve” (p. 92). Coombs and Schmidt (2000) note that taking corrective action serves a dual purpose. Correction attempts to repair current damage and/or prevent a repeat of the crisis.

Coombs (1995) further discusses the utility of taking corrective action. He notes that as an organization takes action to prevent a recurrence of the crisis in the future, it “...seeks forgiveness as it establishes mechanisms designed to protect publics against future threats” (p. 453).

To better understand the concept of correction, one can again turn to Benoit and Brinson’s (1994) analysis of the image repair strategies that AT&T employed during its crisis. First, Chairman Allen assures his audience that AT&T had identified the cause of the problem as a combination of human errors and mechanical failure. He also noted that management practices that should have been followed were not.

Identifying the cause of the problem will not guarantee that it will not happen again. For that reason the offending party must take the next step and discuss with its public the steps it will take toward preventing future errors. Chairman Allen noted that he had personally directed a thorough examination of all of AT&T’s facilities and practices. Therefore, in addition to simply taking action at its New York facility, all of AT&T’s facilities were under examination in order to prevent future problems. Chairman Allen also promised that AT&T would be spending billions of dollars in order to make AT&T’s workers even more skilled and its equipment even more reliable. He also claimed that the company would be actively working with government officials to satisfy concerns about the need for communications backup in situations that affect the public’s welfare. By taking all of these actions, Chairman Allen outlined a detailed plan
in order to prevent any future communication disruption for AT&T customers. As Benoit and Brinson note, together these corrective actions demonstrated, “AT&T’s commitment to take action designed to forestall the recurrence of the problem” (p. 83).

**Bolstering**

The final image restoration strategy that Benoit and Brinson discuss is that of bolstering. In the scholars’ words, “…bolstering strengthens the audience’s positive affect toward the accused, counteracting negative feelings” (p. 77). For a more enhanced understanding of bolstering, one can once again turn to Benoit (1997). He claims that a corporation which finds itself accused of a wrongdoing may use bolstering, “…to strengthen the audience’s positive feelings toward itself, in order to offset the negative feelings connected with the wrongful act” (p. 180). Benoit goes to explain how a corporation might use bolstering by saying, “Businesses may describe positive characteristics they have or positive acts they have done in the past.” Ice (1991) notes that bolstering reminds publics of the existing positive aspects of the organization. “Those accused of wrongdoing can describe valued traits they possess or positive actions they have performed” (Benoit, 1995). Essentially, an offending party may use bolstering to not only divert the audience’s attention away from the transgression but also to remind the audience of the many positive traits demonstrated by the offending organization or individual.

Coombs and Schmidt (2000) provide more insight into this technique, stating that bolstering requires that a corporation note that a certain act was in violation of the company’s policies and regular business practices. Benoit and Drew (1997) explicate that, “Bolstering may be used to mitigate the negative effects of the act on the actor by
strengthening the audience’s positive affect for the actor” (p. 157). By doing so, the scholars explain, the offending party might be able to minimize the offensiveness of the act in question. As Benoit (1997) concludes, “These sentiments, if accepted, should bolster its image and offset damage to its reputation” (p. 180).

Perhaps one of the most thorough discussions of the concept of bolstering comes from Ware and Linkugel (1973). In their examination of apologetic speeches, the scholars explain that, “Bolstering refers to any rhetorical strategy which reinforces the existence of a fact, sentiment, object, or relationship. When he bolsters, a speaker attempts to identify himself with something viewed favorably by the audience” (p. 277). They note that an individual or corporation accused of wrongdoing uses the strategy of bolstering to provide a source of identification between the audience and the offending party. When the party in the wrong uses the tactic of bolstering and reminds its audience of its positive traits, it is seeking identification with the audience and a lessening of the perceived harm of the transgression.

In their analysis of bolstering as it applies to the crisis at AT&T, Benoit and Brinson (1994) note that Chairman Allen reminded AT&T’s customers that the corporation had designed and built its systems to the world’s highest standards. This assertion served three purposes. First, it suggested that the organization was unsurpassed by anyone in quality. Second, AT&T was claiming that it considers itself to be a world-class organization, and should be viewed as such by its customers. Finally, this statement subtly reminded its audience of the basic message of the organization’s advertising campaign: they are the best at service and reliability.
By engaging in the strategy of bolstering, AT&T reminded its audience of the company’s commitment to excellence. Therefore, customers should have no doubts about AT&T’s desire to provide the best service out of any telecommunications corporation in the world. By employing the image restoration tactic of bolstering, Chairman Allen effectively overshadowed the current crisis with references to positive characteristics about the company.

**Denial**

Benoit (1995) discusses the image restoration strategy of denial, in which the offending party denies responsibility for the action in question or shifts the blame to another party. In discussing denial, the scholar illustrates the potential advantage of denying that an offensive event occurred or denying that the accused was the one who performed it. Benoit says:

If no reprehensible act actually occurred (denying that the act actually occurred), the accused’s reputation should not be damaged. If the accused did not commit it (either denying that the accused did the deed, or shifting the blame for the deed to another), again the accused’s face should not be damaged by that action... a successful denial should substantially restore the image. (p. 73).

Clearly, according to Benoit, there are substantial gains for an offending party’s employment of denial. Coombs (1995) states even more succinctly, “Denial is the simple statement that nothing happened—there is no crisis” (p. 450).

Felson and Ribner (1981) liken the tactic of denial to the offering of excuses. As the authors note, “…an excuse… in attributional terms, is a denial of personal causation, i.e., a denial by the offender that he or she caused or intended the act” (p. 137). These
scholars posit that denial involves the accused denying any sort of responsibility for a transgression.

Benoit and Drew (1997) note that often this strategy is called refusal, since it involves the offending party’s refusal to accept that an offensive act occurred or that the accused had anything to do with its occurrence. As the scholars note, “One accused of wrongdoing may simply deny that the act occurred or that he or she committed it” (p. 154).

Ware and Linkugel (1973) provide more insight into the strategy of denial. The scholars state that, “Denial consists of the simple disavowal by the speaker of any participation in, relationship to, or positive sentiment toward whatever it is that repels the audience” (p. 276). Clearly, Ware and Linkugel believe that in order for denial to be effective, the accused must completely distance themselves from any association with the act in question. The accused must also view the offending act negatively, just as the audience does. Also, an effective denial could include the corporation’s insistence that it had no intention of committing a wrongdoing.

To illustrate different examples of successful denial, Benoit (1997) discusses a feud between cola giants Pepsi and Coca-Cola. Pepsi accused Coca-Cola of requiring its clients to pay higher prices, subsidizing its largest customer, McDonald’s. Coke responded by simply denying the claim as entirely false, saying that price increases were universally applied to all customers, without exception (p. 179). Coca-Cola, instead of attacking Pepsi’s character, chose simply to claim that Pepsi’s accusations were false, thereby claiming that there was no crisis since the claims were not true.
Benoit also notes that a second form of denial may be to shift the blame. As an example, he discusses the well-publicized Exxon Valdez oil spill. He notes how, following this crisis, the Chairman of Exxon blamed state officials and the Coast Guard, saying that Exxon could not obtain immediate authorization from either agency to begin cleaning up the spill (p. 180). Exxon claimed to want to clean up the oil spill, but was prevented from doing so by other parties. Therefore, its spread was not their fault, and the blame was shifted to the state of Alaska and the United States Coast Guard.

**Evasion of Responsibility**

Benoit (1995) also introduces a concept similar to denial, that of evading responsibility. He notes that often, when a party cannot deny performing an act in question, it may be able to evade or reduce its apparent responsibility for that act (p. 76). Benoit claims that one way for a rhetor to accomplish this feat is to convince the audience that he or she lacked information or control over important factors in the situation. A second method to accomplish an avoidance of responsibility is to claim that the act in question was justifiable on the basis of pure original motives or intentions.

Brinson and Benoit (1996) further explain the concept of evading responsibility. "Rhetors may... be able to repair their image by evading or reducing responsibility for the offensive act. We tend to hold others responsible only for facts that are reasonably under their control" (p. 30). Here, the authors note that a public will be more willing to forgive an offender if that public believes that the offending party could not reasonably know about negative aspects of a situation. If an organization or individual can convince an audience that they are innocent on the basis of ignorance, then according to Brinson
and Benoit, it is likely that the public may very well forgive the offending party for the transgression.

As an illustration of evasion of responsibility in action, Benoit (1995) discusses a crisis which the department store Sears faced in the early 1990s. After an investigation of the store's auto repair department by undercover agents, the public learned that Sears frequently overcharged customers for mechanical services. The report also revealed that Sears employees experienced constant salary cuts. As Benoit notes, Sears executives stressed the company's good intentions in a letter to customers. The chain let consumers know that it would never intentionally violate the trust of its customers (p. 97). By stressing that the overcharges were not intentional and that the company had only the best interest of its loyal customers in mind, Sears effectively demonstrated the image restoration technique of evading responsibility.
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

With an understanding of the crisis response strategies championed by Benoit and Brinson, one can see how The New York Times employed each of these strategies as a response to Jayson Blair's deceptive reporting. To do so, one must apply each of these strategies individually to the publication's response.

Mortification

First, The New York Times practiced mortification. As Benoit and Brinson (1994) explain, mortification involves the offending party offering an acknowledgement of responsibility for the transgression and an apology for its occurrence. In its apology to readers from the May 11, 2003 edition of The New York Times, the paper accepted full responsibility for allowing this fallacious reporting to continue. At no point did the publication attempt to minimize the damage done by this transgression. The response began by clearly explaining the situation in great detail. The New York Times explained how editors found out about Blair's trail of deceitful reporting and listed his transgressions. As the paper stated:

By November, ... he was fabricating quotations and scenes, undetected. By March, he was lying in his articles and to his editors about being at a court hearing in Virginia, in a police chief's home in Maryland and in front of a soldier's home in West Virginia. ("Correcting the Record: Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception," 2003, p. 1).
Clearly, the paper did not seek to gloss over the severity of the transgression. Also, interestingly, the paper subtly acknowledged its own irresponsible role, by noting that Blair was making these false claims, "undetected." By adding this word in its explanation, *The New York Times* acknowledged that it played just as much a role as Blair, because the people who should have detected such untrue reporting failed to do so on a regular basis. The *Times* also readily acknowledged its role in this occurrence by mentioning several *Times* within the article how Blair had been unwisely promoted on several different occasions, even though some of the staff members at the publication voiced their disapproval.

The paper further employed mortification by including quotations from top executives at *The New York Times*, such as Arthur Sulzberger Jr. chairman of *The New York Times* Company and publisher of the newspaper, whose family has owned a controlling interest in the publication for 109 years. As Sulzberger stated in the article, "It's a huge black eye. It's an abrogation of the trust between the newspaper and its readers." Clearly, Sulzberger made no attempt to minimize the effect of the transgression on loyal readers. He readily acknowledged the severity of the entire situation by noting that *The New York Times* had let its readers down and betrayed their trust.

The publication also used mortification by describing specific examples of Blair's deception. For instance, the article describes an account that Blair wrote about in which he attended a church service in Cleveland with the Rev. Tandy Sloan, whose son, an Army supply clerk, had been pronounced dead in Iraq the previous day. There is no evidence that Blair was ever at the service, or even in Cleveland that day. As the article vividly describes:
A freelance photographer whom Mr. Blair had arranged to meet outside the Cleveland church on April 6 found it maddening that he could not seem to connect with him. The photographer, Haraz Ghanbari, was so intent on a meeting that he placed nine calls to Mr. Blair’s cellphone from 9:32 a.m. to 2:07 p.m., and kept trying six more Times until 10:13 p.m., when he finally gave up. Mr. Ghanbari said he managed to reach Mr. Blair three Times, and three Times Mr. Blair had excuses for why they could not meet. In one instance, Mr. Ghanbari said, Mr. Blair explained that he had left the church in the middle of the service ‘to get his cellphone fixed’—that was why so many of his calls had gone unanswered—‘and was already on his way back.’ (p. 1).

Obviously, since it so painstakingly described this occurrence, The New York Times in no way sought to turn the attention of its readers away from the many transgressions. In another example the publication explains:

On March 24, for example, he filed an article with the dateline Hunt Valley, MD, in which he described an anxious mother and father, Martha and Michael Gardner, awaiting word on their son, Michael Gardner II, a Marine scout then in Iraq. Mr. Blair described Mrs. Gardner ‘turning swiftly in her chair to listen to an anchor report of a Marine unit’; he also wrote about the red, white, and blue pansies in her front yard. In an interview last week, Mrs. Gardner said Mr. Blair had spoken to her only by phone. (p. 1).

Some editors at The New York Times now believe that Blair had simply seen a digital photograph of the Gardners’ home that a Times photographer had submitted to the
paper's photography department, and that was how he knew the color of the flowers in their front lawn.

Benoit and Brinson (1994) state that another important aspect of mortification involves the offending party's acknowledging the suffering of its victims (p. 81). The New York Times' apology clearly contained this aspect of mortification. The apology article noted:

For all the pain resonating through the Times newsroom, the hurt may be more acute in places like Bethesda, MD, where one of Mr. Blair's fabricated articles described American soldiers injured in combat. The puzzlement is deeper, too, in places like Marmet, WV, where a woman named Glenda Nelson learned that Mr. Blair had quoted her in a news article, even though she had never spoken to anyone from the Times. ("Correcting the Record: Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception," 2003, p. 1).

In these statements, The New York Times notes that victims of this false reporting felt more pain than anyone at the publication over this occurrence. The Times' full-page response also included the name of a specific individual affected by Blair's erroneous reporting.

Benoit and Brinson (1994) note that one of the most important components of mortification is an apology. Nowhere in its full-page article did The New York Times directly apologize for allowing such a grievous wrong to occur. However, in addition to Chairman Sulzberger's calling this occurrence "a huge black eye," another executive was quoted in the article as saying this episode was "a terrible mistake" ("Correcting the Record: Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception," 2003, p. 1).
While a direct apology did not take place in this article, using such strong metaphorical language as Sulzberger did, and admitting the severity of the offense as other executives chose to do, one could consider this approach an indirect form of mortification to loyal *New York Times* readers and shareholders. Also, by acknowledging the hurt inflicted on other individuals, the publication could have perhaps been offering a subtle example of mortification.

**Correction**

Benoit and Brinson (1994) state that, following the employment of mortification, a successful apology as a form of image restoration will include the tactic known as correction, in which the guilty party offers examples of the steps it will take in order to prevent similar future occurrences. The first paragraph of the article begins, “A staff reporter for *The New York Times* committed frequent acts of journalistic fraud while covering significant news events in recent months, an investigation by *Times* journalists has found” (“Correcting the Record: *Times* Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception,” 2003, p. 1). The fact that *The New York Times* acknowledged that an investigation into the deceptive reporting was underway alluded to the fact that the publication was taking steps to discover what had happened, so that it could effectively prevent future occurrences. Another sentence near the beginning of the apology stated, “Spot checks of more than 600 articles he wrote before October have found other apparent fabrications, and that inquiry continues.” This statement let readers know the extent of the inquiry. It was exploring more than 600 of Blair’s articles to make sure that every instance of false reporting was found. The statement also assured readers that the inquiry was not over.
The article went on to further discuss this inquiry a few paragraphs later. The fourth paragraph of *The New York Times*’ apology began:

In an inquiry focused on correcting the record and explaining how such fraud could have been sustained within the ranks of the *Times*, the *Times* journalists have so far uncovered new problems in at least 36 of the 73 articles Mr. Blair wrote since he started getting national reporting assignments late last October. (p. 1).

A closer look reveals that this statement served several purposes. First, it gave the reader a more detailed idea of exactly what the corrective action (the investigation) was intended to accomplish. Next, it demonstrated the facts that were uncovered as a result of the inquiry, proving that *Times* executives were aware of the faulty reporting and could thus take action to ensure the prevention of fallacious reporting in the future. Finally, this statement blatantly explained another function of the inquiry: to correct the record with loyal readers. The article said that the inquiry was “...aimed at correcting the record...” (p. 1), thereby demonstrating in plain terms that *The New York Times* was seeking to employ corrective action.

Further into the article, one reads of some interesting findings resulting from the investigation. The investigation identified several reasons why Blair had been allowed to continue reporting for the *Times*, even after his work became suspect. Noting that the *Times* had uncovered the reasons behind his false reporting provided readers with assurance that the publication would take all necessary steps to prevent similar future occurrences. One example read:
The investigation suggests several reasons Mr. Blair’s deceits went undetected for so long: a failure of communication among senior editors; few complaints from the subjects of his articles; his savviness and his ingenious ways of covering his tracks. Most of all, no one saw his carelessness as a sign that he was capable of systematic fraud. (p. 1).

This statement proved that the corrective action the newspaper took in the form of an investigation into Blair’s fraudulent reporting was indeed serving a purpose. It uncovered reasons why he was allowed to continue unpunished. This list demonstrated that Times officials had uncovered the reasons leading to Blair’s deceptive reporting, and since they had pinpointed them, they could stop such deception from happening again. As Benoit and Brinson (1994) note, “Of course, identifying the cause of the problem will not guarantee that it will not recur” (p. 82). However, it is, at worst, a step in the right direction toward prevention.

The last section of the apology noted that Mr. Sulzberger continued to examine how New York Times employees and readers were affected by this crisis. This admittance is a clear demonstration of the fact that corrective action took place on all levels, even if it meant that the most powerful employee of the publication had to become involved in such a tedious task. The Times’ commitment to correction was clear.

Perhaps one of the foremost questions on the minds of loyal New York Times readers involved uncertainty about the current relationship between Jayson Blair and the publication. In another demonstration of employing corrective action, the Times put these questions to rest. “Mr. Blair is no longer welcome in the newsroom he so often seemed unable to leave” (“Correcting the Record: Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves
Long Trail of Deception,” 2003, p. 1). In this to-the-point statement, *The New York Times* assured readers that one form of corrective action that the publication was taking was banning Jayson Blair from the newsroom. His presence would no longer be a threat to the journalistic integrity of the publication.

Benoit and Brinson (1994) also note that an organization’s plan to provide reliable service can be reinforced by the goals it reveals to its audience. As the *Times*’ article stated, “Every newspaper, like every bank and every police department, trusts its employees to uphold central principles…” (“Correcting the Record: *Times* Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception,” 2003, p. 1). This statement compared *The New York Times* to other institutions generally thought to be reliable, and reminded readers that the *Times* expected its employees to adhere to a set of principles, that Jayson Blair deviated from these principles, and also hinted at the fact that efforts to prevent such deviation would be a focus of the paper in the future.

Perhaps the most obvious form of corrective action, however, was located near the beginning of the article. The end of the fifth paragraph states, “The *Times* is asking readers to report any additional falsehoods in Mr. Blair’s work; the email address is retrace@ny77m&s\com” (p. 1). This corrective action once again served several purposes. First, by including the word “additional,” *The New York Times* reminded readers of the corrective action that the paper had taken in the form of a widespread investigation conducted by actual *Times* reporters. Also, this statement suggested that while *The New York Times* had indeed conducted a widespread investigation, it was not going to take any chances that additional falsehoods may have been present in Blair’s reporting. In essence, the publication was telling readers that it is better to be safe than sorry when
dealing with something as delicate and crucial as journalistic integrity. Finally, the imploring of readers to get involved in the investigation served two purposes itself: first, it illustrated the extent to which the Times was willing to take corrective action. Second, it allowed readers to feel a sense of involvement with this corporate giant in bringing a form of justice to an individual guilty of wrongdoing both parties. This form of corrective action demonstrated how carefully The New York Times would attempt to locate Blair’s mistakes and lies.

Bolstering

Bolstering is quite different from the other two image restoration strategies in that it asks the audience to focus on the long-standing positive image that the organization or individual in question has held. As Benoit and Brinson note, “...the act of mortification conveys a strong sense of security. It is neither easy nor pleasant to confess responsibility for suffering of others” (p. 83). Corrective action outlines how this suffering will be prevented in the future. Bolstering, however, deals not so much with the transgression at hand but rather with the positive characteristics that the organization demonstrated before the transgression occurred. As the scholars explain, bolstering shifts the audience’s attention away from the negative act and focuses it on the offending party’s positive attributes.

Bolstering was evident throughout The New York Times’ apology. In the first paragraph, the article claims, “The widespread fabrication and plagiarism represent a profound betrayal of trust and a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper” (“Correcting the Record: Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception,” 2003, p. 1). This sentence served to remind the public that the publication
has been around over a century and a half. The paper was reminding its audience that,
having been loyal to its readers for so long, this 152-year history of the newspaper is
filled with many more positive memories than could ever be overshadowed by this one
instance of false reporting. This statement also mentioned the trust that the audience had
felt toward the paper. Reminding readers that a feeling of trust had existed before the
transgression occurred shifts the focus away from the transgression itself and to a positive
aspect of the relationship between the paper and its readers.

The next example of bolstering occurs several paragraphs later, in the statement
“...the inquiry found that Mr. Blair repeatedly violated the cardinal tenet of journalism,
which is simply truth” (p. 1). By making this claim, The New York Times let its readers
know that, as a part of the field of journalism, this publication, like all others, strives to
adhere to one simple rule: to report truthfully. Here the Times subtly reminded readers
that it was a publication that prides itself on factual reporting, and when one of its
reporters decides not to accurately report, it is nothing less than a deviation from the
norm.

The New York Times also employed the tactic of bolstering by quoting an email
from Jonathan Landman, the publication’s metropolitan editor. Landman wrote in a staff
email, “Accuracy is all we have. It’s what we are and what we sell” (p. 1). Mentioning
this sentiment demonstrated to the audience the publication’s long-held commitment to
excellence and accuracy in its reporting. If accuracy is truly all that the paper has, then
one can expect that the publication will do everything it can to hold on to this essential
attribute.
An extremely subtle example of bolstering can be found near the middle of the article. In 2002, Jayson Blair wrote a story about the interrogation of John Muhammad, one of two suspects in a trail of sniper attacks that plagued the Washington D.C. area in the fall of 2002. Blair’s article was full of errors, even more than most of the rest of his stories. The apology discussed this instance of faulty reporting. A senior editor for The New York Times claimed, “I can’t imagine accepting unnamed sources from him as the basis of a story had we known what was going on” (p. 1). The editor continued, “I can’t even imagine being comfortable with going with the story at all, if I had known that the metro editors flat out didn’t trust him.” This quotation supported the fact that The New York Times has a long-held policy of not accepting unnamed sources, and that in this one instance, that policy was broken. It further illustrated that allowing someone who was untrustworthy to report was uncharacteristic of the publication. Readers could rest assured that, if the Times’ editors knew they could not trust one of their reporters, the reporter certainly would not be allowed to write for the paper. The statement reminded readers that the publication generally trusts all of its reporters fully, and thus, the public should as well.

The most obvious and pervasive examples of bolstering were located near the end of the article. The article stated:

*The New York Times continues as before. Every morning, stacks of the Times are piled at newsstands throughout the city; every morning, newspaper carriers toss plastic bags containing that day’s issue onto the lawns of readers from Oregon to Maine.* (p. 1).
This statement reminded readers of the loyalty of *The New York Times*. It has unfailingly been available for readers for well over a century. Reminding readers of the newsstands that display the publication, or of all the *Times* when the paper has loyally been waiting on their front lawns when they wake up brings to mind positive memories of the *Times*, overshadowing the negativity of Jayson Blair’s deceit. This statement also assured readers that the publication was able to withstand any blemishes that may result because of this situation.

A few paragraphs later, one reads, “...the deceit of one *Times* reporter does not impugn the work of 375 others…” (p. 1). This sentence reminded readers of the nearly 400 other honest reporters for the *Times*. Since the vast majority of *Times* reporters are committed to journalistic excellence, the audience can feel comforted by the fact that Blair was the exception to *The New York Times*’ commitment to accurate reporting, not the rule.

Alex S. Jones, a former reporter for *The New York Times*, noted in the article, “To the best of my knowledge, there has never been anything like this at *The New York Times*. There has never been a systematic effort to lie and cheat as a reporter at *The New York Times* comparable to what Jayson Blair seems to have done” (p. 1). Jones echoed in this sentence that such fallacious reporting is not characteristic of the *Times*, and that in its 152-year history, no reporter ever employed such blatant instances of deceit. Jones’ quotation reminded readers of how accurate the publication had been for the many years prior to Jayson Blair’s employment.

Denial

Eight paragraphs into the response, the paper noted about Blair, "His mistakes became so routine, his behavior so unprofessional, that by April 2002, Jonathan Landman, the metropolitan editor, dashed off a two-sentence e-mail message to newsroom administrators that read: 'We have to stop Jayson from writing for the Times. Right now'" (p. 1). Clearly, The New York Times was attempting to demonstrate that editors at the publication were not responsible for Blair’s fallacious reporting, since some of them knew early on that he was problematic. This demonstration hinted to the audience that the Times was not responsible for Blair’s actions.

The Times also discussed its policy of using a dateline, or a line in the first part of a report which tells readers where a journalist is reporting from. Another example of denial was noticable when the newspaper claimed, "...the newspaper uses a dateline only when a reporter has visited the place. Mr. Blair knew that rule" (p. 1). The article goes on to discuss how Blair frequently used datelines when in reality, he had not visited many of the locations. Here, the Times inadvertently denied responsibility for the false reporting, instead subtly shifting the blame to Blair and away from the paper.

The New York Times’ story also informed readers that as far as editors knew, the reporter was doing his job honestly and accurately. One sentence reads, "As he often did, Mr. Blair briefed his editors by e-mail about the progress of his reporting" (p. 1). This simple, yet effective sentence lets readers know that the editors were under the impression that Blair was doing his job just as he was supposed to, and instead of being perpetrators in his trail of deceit, they too were victims. This statement subtly denied responsibility on the part of the Times, informing readers that editors were doing their job, and in fact, Blair was the sole person at fault.
Evasion of Responsibility

Benoit (1995) also discusses the practice of evading responsibility, in which the offending party attempts to reduce its responsibility for an offending act. The scholar claims that often, this evasion is accomplished when an offending party claims that the negative act was the result of good intentions.

The New York Times, in its response, clearly demonstrated the concept of evasion of responsibility by hiding behind good intentions. The article quoted Blair’s immediate supervisor, Jeanne Pinder, as saying that she wanted to see Jayson Blair succeed (“Correcting the Record: Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception,” 2003, p. 1). Clearly, this staff member was acknowledging that Blair had been allowed to stay on as a reporter, even when he should have been dismissed from the Times’ staff. However, as Pinder also claims, staff members at the publication allowed Blair to continue working because they had noble intentions for him. Because Times staffers wanted Blair to succeed, the audience might be more likely to forgive the paper for the transgression.

Perhaps the most blatant example of claiming that Blair was allowed to stay on staff because of good intentions comes in the discussion of his race. According to one editor in the response, the executive editor of the publication had a clear commitment to diversity within the company. Blair, an African American, continued to advance through the ranks among Times reporters, despite his numerous reporting errors. Several Times executives note that Blair’s race was often cited as a reason for his continued advancement, and that the company did not wish to tarnish the career of a promising young journalist (p. 1). In fact, according to the article, Blair’s race may have played a
role in his obtaining his initial internship with the newspaper. “The Times offered him a slot in an internship program that was then being used in large part to help the paper diversify its newsroom” (p. 1). Clearly, The New York Times’ response sought to convince readers that the publication had the best intentions when keeping Blair on staff after a host of mistakes. By demonstrating that staff members simply wanted to help Blair and that he also played a role in the publication’s efforts to diversify its staff, the Times without a doubt engaged in the image restoration tactic of evading responsibility by claiming good intentions.
CHAPTER FIVE: EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

With the application of Benoit and Brinson’s image restoration strategies to The New York Times’ apology complete, one can begin to evaluate the effectiveness of the publication’s response. To do so, one must answer the initial questions. First, did the response strategies offered by The New York Times concerning the Jayson Blair incident conform to the suggestions offered by William Benoit and Susan Brinson? And second, were the response strategies offered by The New York Times concerning the Jayson Blair incident effective at restoring the publication’s favorable standing among other periodicals?

For the most part, The New York Times strictly adhered to the strategies advocated by Benoit and Brinson. As the application of these strategies to the Times’ apology demonstrates, each of the image restoration tactics championed by Benoit and Brinson were employed effectively in the apology. Because of this adherence to these proven tactics, one can say that The New York Times responded to this crisis appropriately.

First, the publication engaged in the strategy of mortification. As Benoit and Brinson (1994) claim, “In our society, we hold people responsible for their actions” (p. 84). The Times readily accepted the fact that, following this transgression, the general public was going to look for someone to hold responsible for the false reporting, and instead of completely casting the blame elsewhere, the Times accepted responsibility for the crisis. While Jayson Blair may have made up many of his facts, ultimately, The New
York Times was responsible for allowing him to continue reporting inaccurately. Readers likely admired the direct response from Chairman Allen Sulzberger Jr. It would have been easier for Sulzberger to allow a Times spokesperson to respond to this crisis, but, as the most important member of the Times staff, he realized that ultimately he was the individual that most needed to discuss this instance with the public. Because the publication chose to honestly discuss this crisis, readers likely admired its sincerity and as a result, were possibly more willing to forgive this transgression. As communication scholars Benoit and Brinson claim, “…accepting responsibility…should be considered a wise choice.”

The scholars also claim, “…taking corrective action is an appropriate and important image restoration strategy.” They state that, “…apologies are not enough…” The New York Times not only accepted responsibility for this occurrence, but also went on to describe its plans to prevent any similar instances in the future. The article made several statements concerning corrective action: it assured readers that a thorough investigation into Blair’s stories had uncovered a number of falsehoods, it assured readers that the investigation was still ongoing and would likely uncover more falsehoods, it encouraged readers to let the publication know of any falsehoods they might detect in Blair’s stories, and it assured readers that it was taking every effort to evaluate the damage done to them as a result of Blair’s deceit. Benoit and Brinson note, “As long as the corrective action sounds reasonable and appropriate to the relevant audience, it should reassure them that the problem has been solved and/or will not recur.” The corrective steps that The New York Times took were reasonable solutions which seemed within reach.
These two strategies worked together to bolster *The New York Times*’ image. This paper has already outlined how the strategy of mortification led to perceptions of sincerity among the *Times*’ audience. As Benoit and Brinson claim in discussing the AT&T crisis, “...perceptions of sincerity, and the specific corrective actions described should foster a favorable image of AT&T.” Since the *Times* employed the same strategies in a similar manner to AT&T, one can conclude that sincerity and corrective action will work hand in hand to bolster the reputation of *The New York Times*.

However, the *Times* directly implemented bolstering techniques into its apology. It reminded readers that its normal practices of journalism revolved around upholding the truth and reporting accurately. It also reminded readers that the publication had faithfully been available for over a century and a half; therefore, the positive memories a reader shares with the *Times* should overshadow any negative consequences resulting from Jayson Blair’s reporting. Finally, the publication reminded readers that Blair was only one of 375 reporters at the paper, and that he was the only one of these reporters not committed to the *Times*’ long-held tradition of truthful reporting.

The newspaper’s response also illustrated Benoit’s (1995) concept of denial. The author states that denial involves the refusal to admit responsibility for an offensive action, or shifting the blame for that action to another party. The *Times* undoubtedly used this tactic in their apology. The paper was quick to cast blame on Blair for any transgressions, saying things such as, “...Mr. Blair repeatedly violated the cardinal tenet of journalism, which is simply truth” (“Correcting the Record: *Times* Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception,” 2003, p. 1). *The New York Times* effectively
employed the tactic of denial by refusing to ever fully accept responsibility for the transgression and choosing instead to cast a large part of the blame on Blair.

In the Times' response, one can also witness the utilization of evasion of responsibility through the paper’s claiming that it had good intentions for keeping Blair employed. Frequently, the article mentioned the issue of Blair’s race. While some staff members denied that Blair’s race had anything to do with keeping him on staff, the story consistently made mention of the Times' efforts to diversify its newsroom. Other Times editors discussed their desire to help Blair. Clearly, this desire to help Blair, or, the good intentions of New York Times staff members, is an example of evasion of responsibility as advocated by Benoit.

Therefore, one can conclude that all five tactics offered by Benoit and Brinson were present in the Times’ response. Thus, in answer to the first question, one can conclude that The New York Times did indeed adhere to the image restoration strategies advocated by Benoit and Brinson.

Having answered the first question, one can move onto the second question, which asks whether The New York Times’ response to the Jayson Blair incident was effective at restoring the publication’s favorable standing among other newspapers. Answering this second question requires examining other papers’ coverage of this incident.

Nearly all newspapers that commented on The New York Times’ apology did so negatively. Nichols (2003) noted, “...I am one of numerous journalists who are dismayed and puzzled at the Blair story and the way Times editors evidently managed Blair, according to the Times’ own 14,000 word multistory apology to readers on May
11” (“Commentary: On Plagiarism, Effective Management and Race”). Clearly, this journalist felt as though the story only served to further confuse readers, especially those in the journalism profession, as to how such a grievous breach of journalistic integrity could have taken place.

Eisner (2003) wrote, “It is a damning indictment of the best in American journalism, one that should concern anyone who believes that thriving, credible newspapers are essential to democracy” (“The Disturbing Legacy of the Blair Affair”). Apparently, from this scholar’s point of view, the Times’ response was unable to overshadow or repair the damage done not only to The New York Times’ image but also to the whole profession of journalism. Noting that this instance threatens democracy illustrates the extent of the damage which this scholar felt resulted because of Jayson Blair’s deceit. Eisner even sought to inflate the situation, faulting not only Blair or the Times but also the public. As the article went on to note, “But the thing that mystifies and saddens me the most is that no one from the public dared call to complain about Blair’s repeated forays into fiction-writing.” Not only did this scholar feel as though the apology was not sufficient in reversing the damage done but that it also raises additional concerns about journalistic integrity and the public’s responsibility to hold publications accountable for truthful reporting.

Neuharth (2003) chose to discuss and criticize a specific practice of the Times: the publication’s allowance of anonymous sources. The scholar noted that this practice began in the 1970s during the Times’ coverage of the Watergate scandal. For the most part he ignored the Times’ current apology, and instead discussed the history of this practice at The New York Times, saying that it started with the “czarist” Executive Editor
Howell Raines. The scholar concluded, “The only sure way to separate fact from fiction is to ban all anonymous sources. If your newspaper uses them, be very, very skeptical” (“How to Detect Lies in Your Newspaper”). Neuharth’s mention of this questionable practice diverts readers’ attention away from the positives outlined in the Times’ apology and trains it on a questionable practice that may have allowed Blair to continue to report erroneously for so long.

One newspaper chose to respond to this apology by bringing up examples of mistakes that The New York Times made in the past. The article began, “So The New York Times apologizes to its readers for the lying of reporter Jayson Blair. Too little, too late” (“Times Calls Reporter’s Deception a ‘Low Point;’” 2003). The article went on to remind readers that in the 1930s, a Times reporter who claimed that Joseph Stalin wasn’t killing anyone won a Pulitzer Prize. “The world, which remembers 10 million Ukrainians starved to death by Stalin, is still waiting for the Times to return the Pulitzer and apologize for that one.” The article concluded by asking readers to remember a Times reporter who, in 1957 called Cuban dictator Fidel Castro “Democratic, Christian, and anti-Communist.” Clearly, The New York Times’ response had no effect on this scholar, and served only as a catalyst for reminding readers of embarrassing mistakes from the Times’ past.

Not all articles were so harsh, however. Nixon (2003) complimented the publication for taking responsibility for the transgression once it became apparent to Times editors. While he questioned why Blair was allowed to falsely report for so long without reprimand, Nixon even went on to quote Fox New Managing Business Editor Neil Cavuto, who commended the Times for bringing Blair’s actions to light instead of
ignoring them and hoping they would go away. Clearly, this journalist was positively affected by the *Times*' response, and was willing to accept the fact that *The New York Times* was aware of its mistakes and will hopefully take the necessary steps to prevent their future occurrence.

In answer to the second question, one could immediately conclude that the *Times*' response was not enough to restore its favorable standing among other news publications, since the majority of publications seemed to respond negatively to the image restoration tactics. Such a conclusion, however, may not be entirely accurate. While local, regional, and national newspapers were saturated with negative response to the *Times*' apology immediately following the apology, three weeks after the May 11 apology, virtually all newspapers chose not to mention it again. If *The New York Times* was indeed unable to restore its legitimacy among other publications, one would assume that likely these publications would have commented on the situation much longer than they did. Less than a month later, the crisis seemed all but forgotten in the eyes of other newspapers. Therefore, a more accurate answer to the question would be that, while the *Times* suffered initial damage in regard to its favorability among fellow publications, the long-term effects were minimal at worst. The *Times* continues to report daily, virtually without scrutiny from any other publication. It is still considered one of the most respected papers in the world, with one of the largest subscription rates of any periodical in the country. Therefore, to say that *The New York Times* has lost its favorable standing among other publications permanently is not accurate. Temporarily, other newspapers put the *Times* in a negative light, but now, that damage seems to have been reversed entirely. Also, it is important to remember that ultimately the apology was not aimed at
other publications, but at *Times* readers. Perhaps if *The New York Times* sought only to restore its favorable standing among fellow publications, it would have used a different approach.

*The New York Times* is a publicly traded company, and as such, one would expect that if reaction to the apology had been negative, stock prices would have drastically reduced following this crisis. However, the price of stocks fluctuated very little in the days immediately following the apology. On May 9, 2003, the last business day before *The New York Times*’ apology, the price per share for stock in *The New York Times* Company was $46.28 (*The New York Times* Company Price History, May 9, 2003). The price of stock the next business day after the apology, May 12, 2003, was $46.27 per share, a mere one cent per share decline from the previous business day (*The New York Times* Company Price History, May 12, 2003). One would expect that if the apology had a negative effect on readers and shareholders, the price of stock would have drastically plunged immediately following the apology, but no such decline ever occurred. In fact, stock was actually worth nearly a dollar more immediately following the apology than it was two months before the apology (*The New York Times* Company Price History, February 12, 2003). The month after the apology, on June 12, 2003, stock was continuing to rise, closing at $47.51 per share at the end of the business day (*The New York Times* Company Price History, June 12, 2003). Clearly, if *The New York Times*’ stock prices saw essentially no decline following the apology, one must deem the apology effective at restoring reader and shareholder trust in the newspaper.

Perhaps the most conclusive proof of the response’s effectiveness lies in the fact that subscription rates for *The New York Times* remained virtually unchanged following
the *Times*’ response. As one independent journalist and media expert commented a week
after the response, “I don’t know of anybody who has canceled their subscriptions over
this. I am certainly not. I expect The *Times* to be a better paper in the long run as a result
of this...” (Kurtz, 2003).

Bianco, Rossant and Gard (2005) also note that *Times* subscriptions have been
steadily increasing since 1998. In their discussion of how the publication was able to
overcome a scandal of the Jayson Blair proportion, the journalists even note that, “What’s
more, the *Times* posted its gains despite boosting the price of a subscription by more than
25% on average.” Clearly, if readers were negatively impacted by the Jayson Blair
incident, *The New York Times* would not be enjoying such favorable subscription rates,
especially when considering that the price of a subscription has drastically increased
lately.

While the apology did stick to the guidelines offered by the scholars, it fell short
in several respects. Most notably, the *Times* did not directly offer an apology. Nearly all
of the literature on apologia or image restoration suggests offering a direct apology
following a transgression. As Benoit and Brinson (1994) note, a crucial part of
mortification is the offering of a direct apology (p. 84). The *Times* would have done well
to offer a direct apology to its readers for this transgression. Subtly apologizing for a
transgression of this magnitude might not be as effective at restoring the public’s trust
and faith in the publication as a direct, heartfelt apology. Organizations that find
themselves in a similar crisis in the future would do well to avoid subtle hints at an
apology and instead offer an outright apology to the affected individuals.
Another weakness of this response lies in the fact that, while the *Times* did accept blame for the transgression, it also cast most of the blame on Jayson Blair. Much of the focus of the article involved listing examples of Blair’s fallacious reporting, thus turning the audience’s attention from the *Times*’ overall responsibility to the audacity of some of Blair’s claims. This tactic, while perhaps effective at diverting the audience’s attention away from the transgression at hand, did little to answer the many questions that readers were likely to have. Audience members that felt as though the blame lay only with *The New York Times* and who were seeking a direct apology from the publication may have not appreciated this attempt at diverting their attention and avoiding the embarrassing nature of the situation. *The New York Times* spent a great amount of time blaming Jayson Blair as an individual, and barely acknowledged the fact that he was allowed to continue reporting for several years after initial concern about his numerous mistakes began circulating around the newsroom. While many readers may have felt that the fault did lie entirely with Jayson Blair, others were likely to have felt that the publication was also at fault for not stopping him sooner.

The *Times*’ response also tends to blame individuals rather than faulty general practices of the publication. The article brought up the names of many other individuals who could have stopped Blair from reporting at any time. Instead, these individuals did nothing to block him. This tactic tended to place the blame on individuals working at the *Times* rather than on the whole organization. The message sent to readers could be confusing. On the one hand, the *Times* accepted responsibility for the transgression, but often in a very passive way.
Also in question is the article’s focus on Jayson Blair as a person, rather than his questionable business practices. The response needlessly brought up instances from Blair’s past, digging back well before his employment with the Times, and attempted to paint him as a lazy, immature, deceitful, and mentally unstable person. For example, the publication took great pains to discuss the opinions that several of Blair’s college classmates held of him. According to the article, many of them “…considered him immature, with a hungry ambition and an unsettling interest in newsroom gossip” (“Correcting the Record: Times Reporter Who Resigned Leaves Long Trail of Deception,” 2003, p. 1). The article even commented on Blair’s physical stature, saying, “Whether as a student journalist at the University of Maryland or as an intern at the Boston Globe, the short and ubiquitous Mr. Blair stood out.” Though some of these personal characteristics likely did contribute to Blair’s deceptive reporting while an employee at The New York Times, Blair as a person is not the point in question as far as the Times’ response should have been concerned. Rather, the focus of this publication’s apology and any subsequent organizations needing to issue a similar apology should remain solely on his untrustworthy journalism practices, and not on his personal physical or emotional flaws.

While the publication did focus mainly on Blair’s mistakes and not those of the publication, the manner in which it chose to address flaws within the paper is questionable. Instead of blaming the publication as a whole, the article chose to cast the blame on management practices. While being honest about the knowledge of the fact that some managers knew of Blair’s spotty record could have gained the publication additional favorability among its readers, more than likely it simply caused readers to
question why he was allowed to continue for so long. That honesty could have caused faithful *Times* readers to question the overall business practices of *The New York Times*. If Blair was allowed to continue reporting despite a tarnished record, how could readers ever be sure that other reporters for the *Times* were not receiving the same sort of treatment despite questionable reporting? This tactic could have also caused readers to question the competence of the *Times’* management practices. If managers at the publication appeared unwilling to reprimand and dispose of a deceitful reporter, loyal readers may feel as though that is a blemish on the entire management structure of the publication. Future apologies might attempt to focus less on such potentially embarrassing decisions when trying to avoid drawing further attention to such regrettable mistakes. A poor view of management could negatively impact the integrity of the *Times* in the eyes of its readers.
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

In 2003, The New York Times issued an apology to its readers concerning the questionable journalistic practices of a former reporter, Jayson Blair. After applying the work of William Benoit and Susan Brinson to the May 11, 2003 New York Times apology, I determined that the publication did indeed adhere to the image restoration guidelines offered by these communication scholars.

The concept of mortification was demonstrated in the publication’s unwillingness to hide or lessen the negative occurrences resulting from Blair’s false reporting. Since the paper chose to be forthright in its discussion of the transgressions that had taken place as well as their effect on innocent readers, one must agree that at no time did The New York Times seek to hide any wrongdoing. According to the scholars, such a demonstration of humility is likely to make the apology appear more sincere to the audience.

The Times also clearly discussed the corrective action that it would take to make sure such a crisis never occurred again. Frequently, the apologetic article made mention of an ongoing investigation into Blair’s fraudulent reporting. The article also outlined the devastating findings that the investigation had so far uncovered. The article even pleaded with all readers to let the publication know if they discovered any more false statements Blair might have made during his tenure at the Times.

The publication also engaged in the image restoration tactic of bolstering. During this stage, the offending party reminds readers of its positive characteristics in an attempt
to turn their attention from current negativity to former positive attributes. The Times clearly demonstrated this tactic when the article insisted that the publication was dedicated to the cardinal rule of journalism, which is to report honestly and accurately. The article also reminded readers that for over a century and a half, The New York Times has faithfully been found on front lawns and newsstands across the country. Readers could not help but recall the positive attributes of this publication.

When using the tactic of denial, the offending party will deny responsibility for the offending act, often by shifting the blame to others. Frequently, The New York Times' response attempted to shift the blame away from the paper and toward Jayson Blair. The article was quick to provide readers with numerous examples of Blair’s transgressions while distancing Times staff members from any wrongdoing.

The response engaged in the tactic of evading responsibility, which is often accomplished by convincing the audience that any wrongdoing is the result of good intentions. The New York Times mentioned several examples in which staff members did not want to tarnish the career of the promising young journalist. Thus, according to the article, the Times' motives were noble.

Despite its faithful employment of the image restoration tactics offered by the scholars, other publications were quite negative in their critiques of the Times immediately following the apology. Thus, the simple conclusion to draw from this fact would be that The New York Times’ apology was not sufficient in restoring the publication’s favorable standing among other newspapers. However, nearly two years after the apology’s appearance, subscription rates for the publication remain strong, and criticism about this incident is nonexistent. Since less than three weeks after the apology
essentially nothing was mentioned about this incident again in any major daily publication, one must conclude that the apology was in fact sufficient at stifling any long-term criticism the paper might otherwise have suffered at the hands of rival publications. Also, one must bear in mind that the apology was aimed primarily at restoring readers' trust in the *Times*, not that of other publications.

While it seems as though the apology was sufficient, questions still remain about the specifics of its approach. First, nearly all communication scholars, in their discussions of image restoration, agree that one of the primary components of mortification is the issuance of a direct apology. Nowhere in the *Times*’ article did the publication directly apologize to its audience for any transgression. Future organizations that find themselves amidst similar circumstances may want to remember the advice of communication scholars and offer a direct apology as opposed to an indirect, subtle apology.

This study also concludes that the article did shift a great amount of the blame on Blair, as opposed to taking the advice of the scholars and accepting full responsibility for the transgression. While denying responsibility, if done subtly, can help restore a tarnished image, overusing this tactic can result in more negative feelings toward the accused. The scholars note that shifting the blame in this manner can often make the apology appear less sincere; therefore, this strategy should be avoided. Future offending parties might want to remember to avoid shifting the blame to any other person or organization, but instead to accept the full burden of blame for any wrongdoing.

Concurrent with its trend of blaming Jayson Blair, *The New York Times* also frequently blamed poor communication between individuals at the paper as well as
editors who knew of Blair’s spotty journalistic track record and chose to say nothing. This silence could be seen as another attempt on the part of the publication to shift the blame away from itself and onto individuals working at the Times. According to the scholars, the publication would have done better to accept the blame in its entirety, instead of singling out individual Times employees.

The Times was rather relentless in its attack of Jayson Blair’s personal character. Nowhere in their discussion of apologia strategies do the scholars claim that attacking an individual’s character is a positive step for an offending party to take. The New York Times, and any future publications accused with such wrongdoing, would do well to focus only on the transgression at hand, and not engage in such a thorough discussion of someone’s character.

Limitations and Suggestions

The article and book by which I analyzed the Times’ apology were appropriate for this study, as they discussed incidents similar to the situation that threatened the legitimacy of The New York Times, and analyzed responses similar to that of The New York Times. Benoit and Brinson clearly outlined the communication strategies this company employed to restore its favorable standing among its customers, which was also the unstated goal of The New York Times’ apology. The strategies that AT&T employed were quite similar to the strategies The New York Times employed.

While the works of William Benoit and Susan Brinson did deal with the successful apologia strategies employed by a large multinational corporation following a crisis, their studies did not specifically address such a situation as it applies to the print journalism field. In print media, the target audience knows a product based only on its
history of reliability, as that product is never exactly the same two days in a row. Therefore, while the work of Benoit and Brinson was largely applicable here, it may not be entirely so.

Such a conclusion, however, supports my initial belief that an enormous void exists in this area of communication research. While a plethora of research exists concerning multinational businesses and their use of apology once they are accused of a transgression, little if any research exists regarding news publications accused of wrongdoing. Often, the media finds itself the victim of much harsher criticism than other organizations, and thus any tools that could be used to restore a tarnished image would undoubtedly benefit the entire field of journalism. Communication scholars would do well to treat multinational newspapers as multinational corporations and study their successful and unsuccessful uses of apology when they find themselves accused of wrongdoing to provide such publications with a comprehensive model of successful print media image restoration tactics. Much more research is necessary in this area of communication studies if it is to be of any use to any subsequent publication that commits a transgression of some magnitude.

The cardinal rule that most daily news publications attempt to follow is to report with honesty and accuracy. Most of the time, when a mistake is made, the mistake is unintentional, and a simple sentence-long correction buried deep in the paper will suffice at making amends for its occurrence. However, every once in a while, a publication finds itself the victim of intentional false reporting. Perhaps the reporter was seeking to make a favorable impression on the paper’s editors and readers. Perhaps the reporter is simply lazy and does not want to take the time necessary to check his or her facts or conduct
painstaking interviews, or perhaps the reporter simply wishes to advance his or her own biases. Regardless of the circumstances leading up to the transgression, the effects are often devastating for the paper’s reputation, and a more drastic form of correction is necessary. So widespread and damaging were the mistakes of Jayson Blair that *The New York Times* had no choice but to offer a full-page, front-page apology and explanation to its readers. Though flawed, the apology appears to have worked, as the incident that for a short time loomed over the *Times*’ long-standing reputation has been nearly forgotten in the pages of rival publications, and the paper’s subscription rates have yet to drop as a result of the incident.

Much more research is required to fill in the gaps of communication studies dealing with how print publications handle embarrassing occurrences, but this research may serve as a starting point for future communication scholars. In any case, it appears that now, with the embarrassment of the Jayson Blair incident in the distant past, *The New York Times* can continue with its mission of publishing “All the news that’s fit to print.”
References


