“Moral Fables of Public Relations Practice: The Tylenol and Exxon Valdez Cases”

Pauly and Hutchison

**Overview**

This article covers two important cases relevant to Communication in general and Public Relations in particular: The Tylenol and Exxon Valdez cases. It examines how these two cases have been studied and analyzed—as a kind of meta-case study. It asks whether these cases should set a standard in public relations ethics.

**Why do the authors do this study? (i.e. Why did the choose Tylenol and Exxon Valdez?)**

1. The authors chose to study Tylenol and Exxon Valdez cases because in the years they have been studied, these two cases \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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2. The authors claim that perhaps these cases are \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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**How did the authors conduct the study?**



**Case As a Mode of Moral Imagination**

* Case studies function as the signature narrative form of PR. They are used to set standards in the profession
* “Those who have voluntarily placed themselves in positions of trust concerning the interests of others must give careful consideration to those interests” (May, 1996 as cited in Pauly & Hutchinson, 2005, p. 234).

**Facts of the Case**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Company | Crisis | Reaction |
| Johnson & Johnson | (1982) |  |
| Exxon Corporation | (1989) |  |

**Ethical Implications of the Crises**

* Textbooks:
  + “[C]ore ethical principles as an explanation,” (p. 236) as if decision had made based on deliberative morality
    - Johnson & Johnson’s \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
    - Exxon’s \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
  + **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**
    - Johnson & Johnson’s quick response
    - Exxon taking 10 days to address situation
    - Ethics over legal obligations and risks
  + Positive public reactions is assumed to equal proper ethics
* Scholarly texts:
  + \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
    - Johnson & Johnson: good
    - Exxon: bad
* Media silence as negative and unethical because it “withholds” information
* Failure or success defines morality
* New Coverage
  1. Both cases as stories of moral judgment and blame
  2. Two habits of news reporting: Framing and sourcing.
  3. Framing
  4. Sourcing
  5. Main frame: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
  6. Anything that gave “bad publicity” was considered a crisis
  7. Johnson & Johnson as a “gold standard”

**Conclusions**

* The Johnson & Johnson and Exxon Valdez cases created the narrative of crisis communication, but should not set the moral standards for public relations ethics.
* Three faulty conclusions:
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* “Treating ethics as a heroic response undervalues the steady, conscientious struggle needed to behave honorably toward each stakeholder” (p. 246).