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

John J. Pauly and Liese L. Hutchison
Department of Communication
Saint Louis University

❑ *Discussions of the Tylenol and Exxon Valdez cases found in textbooks, public relations scholarship, and news coverage are assessed to understand the meanings that practitioners, educators, critics, and journalists have attributed to those events. The essay objects to a central claim made by critics who say these cases set standards for ethical behavior in public relations. This claim, according to us, mistakes moral drama for ethical deliberation.*

When business and public relations executives talk about moral leadership in times of crisis, chances are someone will compare the cases of Tylenol and the Exxon Valdez. In scores of articles and books, journalists, leadership and management consultants, political scientists, economists, environmentalists, and public health advocates have all taken their turn interpreting the significance of those events. Equally striking is how often the two have been paired to make a point about public relations. Discourse and memory have woven the 1982 product tampering and the 1989 Alaskan oil spill into a single parable in which Johnson & Johnson represents the public relations profession at its best, and Exxon the profession at its worst. A 1994 speech by the noted practitioner and textbook author Fraser Seitel illustrated the commonplace. Seitel (1994) cited the Tylenol and Valdez cases to demonstrate his first commandment of public relations: "To hold as our one and only God, the spirit of Truthful Communications." Johnson & Johnson prospered because it explained why it was removing Tylenol from the shelves, Seitel argued; by contrast, Exxon "said little and lost terribly" (p. 203).

What should we make of this tale? Seitel (1994) and others rightly believe that the Tylenol and Valdez cases offer important lessons about crisis management, the importance of executive leadership, and media relations. However, his biblical metaphor implies a value judgment as well. Like many public relations practitioners and educators, Seitel proposed

Tylenol–Valdez as a moral fable, a cautionary tale about how the profession ought or ought not do its work. That pairing has been so taken for granted that we should pause to consider what it means. With so many natural disasters, corrupt practices, safety evasions, and industrial accidents from which to choose (Mitroff & Pauchant, 1990), why pick these two? With so many lessons to learn, why distill from these crises a story about public relations? With so many cases to contrast, why invest the comparison of these two with such moral weight?

This article analyzes discussions of the Tylenol and Valdez cases in textbooks, public relations scholarship, and news coverage of subsequent crises to understand the meanings that practitioners, educators, critics, and journalists have attributed to those events. In particular, our goal is to test the widely accepted claim that these cases set standards, good and bad, for ethical behavior in public relations. Our main objection to this claim is that it mistakes moral drama for ethical deliberation, accepting the public praise of Johnson & Johnson and the public criticism of Exxon as evidence of ethical virtue, or its lack. What does it mean, then, when the profession searches for evidence of its ethical commitments in such cases, or offers them, juxtaposed, as moral exemplars?

Our method was to discover as many discussions of the two crises as we could in public relations principles and case studies textbooks and in professional and scholarly journals and books. We also used the LexisNexis database to track mentions of the Tylenol and Valdez cases in newspaper and magazines stories from 1989 to 2004, as one measure of how the popular memory of those cases takes shape. Once we had gathered this body of evidence, we applied methods of qualitative textual analysis described by Pauly (1991) and now widely used by many scholars in the humanities and social sciences. We looked for patterns of storytelling, characterization, and framing across these different genres—textbooks, scholarly journal articles and book chapters, and newspaper and magazine stories—in the belief that similarities in argument, interpretation, and tone would support our claim that many commentators have accepted the Tylenol–Valdez comparison as a moral commonplace.

Our argument proceeds as follows. We begin by noting the public relations profession's dependence on case studies as a mode of narrative and self-reflection. We borrow a line of reasoning from the philosopher Larry May (1996) to propose a standard for judging the adequacy of case studies as a mode of ethical analysis. After briefly summarizing the facts of each case, we analyze the discourse about the Tylenol and Valdez crises in three bodies of literature (public relations textbooks, scholarly articles, and news stories) and conclude with an interpretation of what, if anything, these cases tell us about the ethics of public relations.

Cases As a Mode of Moral Imagination

The importance attributed to the Tylenol and Exxon Valdez crises reflects, in part, the weight that public relations practitioners and educators place on the study of cases. Pauly and Hutchison (2001) argued that the case study is public relations' signature narrative form. In its journal articles and textbooks and in award competitions like the Silver Anvil, the profession has made the case its preferred mode of self-analysis, using it to propose standards by which the profession would like to be judged. The day-to-day use of cases is largely technical. Teachers employ them to show students how to assemble the parts of a complex campaign, and students treat that exercise as authoritative because it simulates a world of real-time decision making. Not surprisingly, the normal focus of public relations cases is on practical outcomes—problems solved, goals met, news coverage earned, crises managed, criticisms answered, reputations repaired.

Yet, cases also function as narratives—forms of storytelling that deploy setting, plot, characterization, and motivation to make the world coherent and meaningful. Their very making and telling involve us in moral sense making, as rhetorical critics from Kenneth Burke to William Benoit have reminded us. Burke (1973) argued that, in important respects, literary texts resemble traditional proverbs. Insofar as language is persuasive by its very nature, Burke said any story always urges a perspective on us, telling us what to look for and look out for. Public relations cases operate in just this fashion. What they "look out for" is any challenge to an organization, be it a threat to financial well-being or to moral standing or reputation (Benoit, 1995). The inclusion of a case in a textbook, scholarly journal, or news story signals to the reader that there are lessons to be learned, and that the reader would do well to pay attention.

Thus the act of choosing and constructing cases should be understood as moral as well as technical work, or, in Burke's (1973) terms, as a search for representative anecdotes that will render a profession's work legitimate as well as intelligible. What is distinctive about the public relations case (like the business school case) is that it takes the organization, rather than the individual, as its unit of analysis, to make an organization's behavior visible and thus available to be pondered and critiqued. When collected, cases begin to constitute a dramaturgy. They document a profession's triumphs and failures, offering stories about how practitioners have managed group conflict, responded to threats to workers' health, protected the market value of a brand, repaired an organization's reputation, safeguarded customers' lives, or created occasions for collective memory and community celebration.

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For all their moral drama, however, public relations cases tend to gloss over an organization's actual ethical practices. Public relations' role in the interplay of empirical evidence, legal argument, technical expertise, personal influence, standard procedures, social norms, and moral authority remains largely invisible.

May (1996) has suggested that just such social processes powerfully shape the ethics of professionals. In his book *The Socially Responsive Self*, May argued that our moral concepts "need to be understood as embedded in social structures and processes such as socialization, solidarity, and collective consciousness" (p. 2). He especially hoped to show how social and organizational worlds enable or constrain professionals' sense of integrity and social responsibility. Drawing on communitarians such as Charles Taylor (1989), May argued for a plural, social self whose beliefs and principles emerge in interaction with others. "The background or orientation provided by our group identifications," May wrote, "provides the thread out of which the web of self will be spun" (p. 14). Drawing on the critical legal theory of Roberto Unger (1983), May suggested that professionals ought to understand their social responsibility as a "fiduciary duty": "Those who have voluntarily placed themselves in positions of trust concerning the interests of others must give careful consideration to those interests" (p. 136).

We find two aspects of May's (1996) reasoning particularly relevant to the study of public relations ethics. First, public relations is just the sort of socially embedded profession he had in mind. Its practitioners have long struggled to accommodate their conflicting responsibilities to multiple publics. An influential theory such as two-way symmetrical communication (Grunig, 2001; Grunig & Hunt, 1984) can be understood, in part, as an attempt to describe the fiduciary obligations of public relations within the social science idiom of "information." May's style of ethical reasoning begins elsewhere—not with an analysis of information flows but with a fuller conception of the self as moral actor and of the social worlds inhabited by that self. Rather than treating the public relations professional as autonomous being governed by a single core principle (tell the truth, promote the client's interests), May recognized the plural social demands on each individual as well as the complexity of professionals' work.

Second, May's (1996) approach suggests a way of making case studies a more useful mode of ethical reflection. We believe that cases, as they are now written, offer mostly moral dramaturgy—an affirmation of the goodness or badness of an organization's public acts. May's argument leads us to believe that cases would be more valuable guides to ethics if they described the social processes of deliberation, for it is through such processes that groups meet to interpret situations and decide on lines of actions. It is at such moments that professionals are called to give voice to their fiduciary duties and find their concerns acknowledged, resisted, ridiculed, praised, or silenced.

Facts of the Case

Analyses of the Tylenol and Valdez cases have been available for more than a decade. They typically draw from news accounts, press releases, lawsuit records, and government hearings. Although the facts included are sometimes contradictory, the basics of the cases remain roughly similar from one text to another. The summary of each case offered below is a composite, written to resemble the accounts that appear in public relations textbooks (Center & Jackson, 2003; Fearn-Banks, 2002; Seitel, 2004; Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2005).

On September 20, 1982, the managers of Johnson & Johnson learned that a product of its subsidiary, McNeil Consumer Products, was implicated in the deaths of several people in the Chicago area. As events unfolded, Johnson & Johnson realized that someone was putting cyanide into its Tylenol capsules. A series of responses followed quickly: The company immediately warned the public, pharmacies, and doctors regarding the situation; it pulled the product off the shelves nationwide as more cases came to light (at a cost of approximately $100 million); the CEO, James Burke, took front stage, working with the media and showing the public that he was committed to solving the problem; the company established a crisis team that included the top public relations person in the organization, Lawrence Foster; Johnson & Johnson offered a $100,000 reward to find the killer, distancing itself from the idea that the tampering occurred internally; and it reintroduced the product in safer, tamper-resistant packaging to much fanfare and attention. Much of this response occurred within days of the deaths.

Almost 7 years later, on March 24, 1989, a tanker belonging to the Exxon Corporation ran aground in the Prince William Sound in Alaska. The *Exxon Valdez* spilled millions of gallons of crude oil into the waters off Valdez, killing thousands of fish, fowl, and sea otters. Hundreds of miles of coastline were polluted and salmon spawning runs disrupted; numerous fishermen, especially Native Americans, lost their livelihoods. Exxon,

by contrast, did not react quickly in terms of dealing with the media and the public; the CEO, Lawrence Rawl, did not become an active part of the public relations effort and actually shunned public involvement; the company had neither a communication plan nor a communication team in place to handle the event—in fact, the company did not appoint a public relations manager to its management team until 1993, 4 years after the incident; Exxon established its media center in Valdez, a location too small and too remote to handle the onslaught of media attention; and the company acted defensively in its response to its publics, even laying blame, at times, on other groups such as the Coast Guard. These responses also happened within days of the incident.

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The symmetry of these cases helps explain why they have been so often linked in public relations lore. Johnson & Johnson acted quickly and publicly; Exxon did not. Johnson & Johnson's CEO became actively and visibly involved in the resolution of the crisis; Exxon's did not. Johnson & Johnson took responsibility for the crisis by withdrawing its products; Exxon blamed others. A top public relations person was a member of the Johnson & Johnson crisis team; no such person was visible in the Exxon response. These polar differences would encourage the pairing of the two crises as good and bad examples of public relations practice.

The Ethical Implications of the Crises

Public relations professionals and educators have discussed the Tylenol and Valdez cases at three key sites: textbooks, scholarly articles, and news stories. We chose these three because they cover a range of audiences, including students, professors, practitioners, and the general public, and are written according to different conventions. For each body of materials, we analyze what the presence or absence of ethics talk signifies, and the ways in which ethical issues—when recognized—are framed.

Textbooks

Textbook accounts of the Tylenol and Valdez tend to employ three main narrative strategies. They invoke core ethical principles as an explanation

of each company's behavior, attribute corporate decisions to presumed moral deliberations, and cite public opinion as evidence of ethical probity.

Several textbooks search the Tylenol and Valdez cases for evidence of core ethical principles. Center and Jackson (2003) said that one of the factors that helped Johnson & Johnson weather the Tylenol crisis was the organization's culture and its founder's belief in social responsibility. "High ethical standards were set in place early on to be continued as a tradition or as a legacy" (p. 185). In addition, the company's much-lauded corporate credo declared that the first responsibility was to the users of their products. Center and Jackson implied that Johnson & Johnson relied on its credo when deciding how to act. Conversely, Fearn-Banks (2002) cited some Exxon employees' belief that the corporate culture of cutting costs at Exxon had led to the accident because "the company had cut crews, and that the short-staffed crews worked long hours and got little sleep" (p. 100). Her example implies that Exxon responded to the bottom line, rather than any core ethical principle such as concern for employee or tanker safety. Guth and Marsh (2003) showcased truth telling as Johnson & Johnson's core ethical principle. The truth telling occurred when the company, after initially saying that no cyanide was present at any of its manufacturing facilities, quickly realized that its statement was false and issued a news release stating that cyanide was present at a plant.

Sometimes an organization's public performance is taken as evidence of a core principle at work. Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (2004) praised Johnson & Johnson on just such grounds; although the company was not at fault for the tampering, it "expressed sympathy for the deaths upfront" (p. 345). By contrast, Fearn-Banks (2002) said, Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl's first public statement discussed the chemical process that would be used to counteract the spill and "made no apologies to the fishermen whose livelihoods had been affected. He showed no emotion over the impact of the disaster" (p. 101). In each of these versions, the reader might reasonably infer that the presence or absence of an ethical principle dictated each company's behavior. However, the actual evidence offered by the case does not entirely support such attributions. Johnson & Johnson was forced to tell the truth regarding the cyanide, in part, because the information had already leaked to a few media outlets. Rawl's failure to display his emotions also did not mean that he had no concern for the Alaskan people and wilderness.

The textbook examples of decisions made by Johnson & Johnson and Exxon leave the reader with the impression that those organizations deliberated (or not) on ethical matters before deciding on a course of action. Several authors cite Johnson & Johnson's willingness to cooperate with the media as evidence of a consciously chosen policy. Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000) stated that because Johnson & Johnson's first concern was

with its 100 million customers, "The first critical public relations decision, taken immediately and with total support from company management, was to cooperate fully with the news media. The press was key to warning the public of the danger" (p. 26). Conversely, Seitel (2004) pointed out, Exxon's chairman did not release a statement for "a full week," and it took the company "a full 10 days after the crisis" (p. 69) to place an ad of apology in 166 newspapers. These descriptions, especially when read against one another, leave students with the impression that working with the media is ethically right, and refusing to is wrong. However the ethical issues are more complicated. Both companies arguably tried to do the right thing *quickly;* one of them simply spoke more eloquently about its own response. Center and Jackson (2003) acknowledged that Exxon did respond quickly but "concentrated on emphasizing cleanup efforts rather than addressing the public perception that it didn't do enough, soon enough" (p. 340). Responding to questions by the media was not Johnson & Johnson's first impulse. The company initially did not pull Tylenol from the shelves as long as the problem was centered in Chicago. Only after a copycat poisoning occurred in California, said Fearn-Banks (2002), did the company decide that "removing the product from all stores was the only way to show the public that it was concerned about the welfare of its customers" (p. 95).

Absent any description of each corporation's deliberative processes, the role of ethics in shaping key decisions remains obscure. For example, a familiar issue in public relations is the relative weight accorded legal and ethical advice. Guth and Marsh (2003) pointed out that Johnson & Johnson was not legally required to pull Tylenol from the shelves. "Company lawyers may even have feared that such an action would be an admission of liability. However, Johnson & Johnson recalled the product out of what company officials felt was a moral obligation to their customers" (p. 176). Center and Jackson (2003) painted a different picture for Exxon: "For legal reasons, it was difficult for Exxon to show remorse or even admit to the environmental ramifications of the crisis" (p. 341). The implication, again, is that Johnson & Johnson chose ethics over legal risk. However neither case offers concrete evidence to explain the role that ethical considerations played in either company's strategy. The textbooks presume the deliberations and values that produced each organization's visible choices.

The third strategy is citing positive public opinion as evidence of ethical probity. Seitel's (2004) judgment of the Tylenol crisis illustrates this strategy. He wrote that "the field's finest ethical moment occurred when the Johnson & Johnson Company, in the wake of unspeakable tragedy brought about by its lead product Tylenol, didn't hesitate to choose the ethical course" (p. 42). In the same vein he wrote of the Valdez crisis that "in the history of public relations practice, few communications issues have been handled as questionably, received as much global notoriety,

and had such far-reaching implications on the profession as those involving the Exxon Corporation in 1989" (p. 67).

Some commentators argued that the credibility of the two organizations still hangs in the balance because of how these crises were handled. Lattimore, Baskin, Heimann, Toth, and Van Leuven (2004) stated that, in terms of long-term credibility, "Exxon paid a heavy price for not immediately facing up to the crisis" (p. 195), even though, as Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, and Agee (2005) noted, the company spent $3 billion for the clean up. Johnson & Johnson, on the other hand, went on to win numerous industry awards and honors, including the "best corporation reputation" award from The Reputation Institute in both 2000 and 2001 (Center & Jackson, 2003, p. 191). In such examples, public esteem is taken as the measure of an organization's virtue.

What is striking in these examples is how often ethical behavior is attributed or assumed rather than empirically demonstrated.

What is striking in these examples is how often ethical behavior is attributed or assumed rather than empirically demonstrated. The standard of analysis constantly shifts. At times, Johnson & Johnson is judged ethical because it honored core values. At other times, the company is judged ethical because its actions won popular acclaim. These narrative habits tend to obscure the ethical contradictions of each case. Johnson & Johnson is perceived as ethical because it pulled Tylenol from the shelves, even though it did not do so initially. Exxon is perceived as unethical because it came across as unconcerned about the public's perception of its efforts, even though it spent $3 billion cleaning up Alaska. Because the textbooks are silent about each company's actual deliberations, the nature of public relations' practitioners' input, and the weight that ethical concerns carried in the processes of group decision making, cannot be resolved.

Scholarly Literature

The scholarly literature employs strategies similar to those in the textbooks—citing Johnson & Johnson as a good and Exxon as a bad example of public relations, giving primacy to Johnson & Johnson's talk about its good works, and treating media access as an ethical end in itself.

Small (1991), like Seitel (1994), praised Exxon for removing thousands of gallons of crude oil but criticized the company for not telling the public

about its efforts. "Ironically," Small said, "the expenditure by this giant corporation was probably *more* than one would expect. And yet, the black eye in public was as great and as lasting as probably any other in American corporate history" (p. 12). In such tellings, failing to talk to the media comes to seem an ethical lapse, an abdication of the organization's responsibility to the public that the news media represent.

In some scholarly accounts, any attempt to curtail media access is similarly criticized as unethical. For example, Susskind and Field (1996) said that fishermen and residents of Valdez were concerned that Exxon paid them for mitigation efforts but required them not to discuss their work with the media. This information is left hanging as an implicit question for the reader: Was Exxon trying to block the workers' First Amendment rights? Or limit the company's liability? Or control media access to sources? Such restrictions are not at all rare, of course; many organizations insist that employees and contractors not discuss their work with family members, neighbors, and the media to keep competitive advantages, limit liabilities, and protect intellectual property. Yet, in this context, requiring confidentiality is made to seem an ethical lapse.

Leeper (1996) also emphasized the shortcomings of Exxon's talk about its work. Using Ron Pearson's discussion of Jurgen Habermas's theory of discourse ethics, Leeper found ethical fault with several of Exxon's behaviors. He argued that the company delayed responding to the crisis, failed to recognize the diversity of concerns, and used self-serving media to frame the story. Like several other scholars, Leeper focused on Exxon's talk more than its actions. Is it inherently unethical to delay responding to the media after an accident? Leeper seemed to say yes. All these examples, in a sense, accept journalists' news-gathering routines as an ethical norm. When public relations caters to those routines (as with Johnson & Johnson), the behavior is thought ethical. When it resists those routines or manages them badly (as with Exxon), then the company is thought not just ineffective but unethical.

The scholarship on the Tylenol and Valdez crises takes its purpose as normative rather than descriptive. It emphasizes how Exxon *should* have behaved, basing its judgment on retrospective inferences about the choices the company did or did not make. However, as with the textbooks, the scholarship does not describe Johnson & Johnson or Exxon's deliberations in a way that would allow us to understand the role ethics played in each corporation's decisions. Olaniren and Williams (2001) attributed the fact that Exxon "made no meaningful effort to communicate to the public" (p. 497) to the company's failure to anticipate and prepare, but they base that judgment on their interpretation of that company's public communication. Johnson and Sellnow (1995) analyzed the rhetoric of a speech given by Exxon president W. D. Stevens 6 months after the spill. Stevens argued that human error

caused the spill and that no organization was immune to the consequences when delegating responsibility to employees. The authors disagreed with Stevens's assessment: "Assigning blame to workers was unnecessary and inappropriate … crew members had made crucial mistakes for which the organization was liable" (Johnson & Swerdlow, 1995, p. 59). Again, the ethical judgment comes after the fact, based on a critique of the company's public communication rather than a description of its decision making.

In general, the scholarship often conflates strategic and ethical behavior. Acts that produce an advantageous public response are assumed also to be virtuous. Benson (1988) praised Johnson & Johnson for initiating communication and being proactive during the 1986 tampering, singling out unethical media and praising media they found fair. Yet Benson also acknowledged the strategic advantages of this approach: "By doing this, these communicators can usually stipulate the important issues in the top, and they can also control how message receivers view a topic" (p. 57). Williams and Treadaway (1992) faulted Exxon's reactive behavior on both strategic and ethical grounds. The company was being reactive by not making "a strong initial statement immediately following the accident" (p. 59), but also for not taking immediate responsibility for the accident, downplaying the severity of the spill, blaming others like the Coast Guard, and scapegoating the captain. Pinsdorf (1999) noted that Johnson & Johnson decided to keep the Tylenol name for strategic reasons—because "a new name might suggest guilt" (p. 87)—but she nonetheless praised the company's management for deciding to "cooperate fully and candidly with the news media" (p. 86). In such examples, the success or failure of each company's public communication is taken as a sign of the morality of each company's decisions, and of the ethical values that guided those decisions.

News Coverage

By the early 1990s, the Tylenol and Valdez cases would work their way into popular memory. Each would inspire thousands of news stories, as well as dozens of follow-up analyses and anniversary stories. The Tylenol and Valdez crises lent themselves to heavy news coverage, not least because their circumstances offered opportunities for moral judgment and the assignment of blame. Both were powerful dramas in which innocents had been victimized. The consumers who purchased and used the Tylenol died from a mundane act in which millions of other Americans participate every day. The victims of the Exxon spill were seabirds and other wildlife, inhabitants of an area many Americans considered the last pristine wilderness in the country.

Within months after the 1989 Valdez crisis, reporters began linking Johnson & Johnson and Exxon in news stories about subsequent environ-

mental, financial, and health crises. The pairing was partly a matter of timing. Because the crises occurred relatively close in time, within the immediate memory of many reporters and editors, comparisons came easily to hand, particularly after Exxon's handling of its publicity seemed so badly botched in comparison to Johnson & Johnson's. The pairing also reflected two familiar habits of news reporting: framing and sourcing. By *framing* we mean the process by which a news story sets the terms within which events are depicted. As a previous, widely publicized crisis, Tylenol suggested a frame of reference for Valdez, and the Tylenol-Valdez pair, once established, a frame for every subsequent corporate catastrophe. By *sourcing* we mean a reporter's use of experts and officials to add authority to a news account. Sources helped journalists create a scorecard for each new crisis, establishing Johnson & Johnson and Exxon as the high and low ends of a taken-for-granted rating scale.

Johnson & Johnson was a "gold standard" against which deficient examples like Exxon could be judged.

The key act of framing was news stories' declaration that the Tylenol and Exxon events signaled the rise of a new profession, crisis management. As with other social trends, the journalistic coverage rolled across the country, as one newspaper after another found occasion to take up the theme. In the years after the Valdez, stories about the profession of crisis communication appeared in the *St. Petersburg Times* (Albright, 1989), *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Chambers & Asher, 1991), *Memphis Commercial-Appeal* (Aitchison, 1991), *San Francisco Chronicle* (Pelline, 1991), *Washington Post* (Skrzycki, 1993), *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (Marcotty, 1993; Merrill, 1995), *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Steyer, 1993), *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (Rouvalis & Halvonik, 1994), and *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Howard, 1999). Each story positioned Johnson & Johnson and Exxon as opposed examples of crisis management, and although they were not always the only cases mentioned, in every story previously cited they were the main comparison. A *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* story (Lindeman, 2000) made explicit the stories' shared judgment: Johnson & Johnson was a "gold standard" against which deficient examples like Exxon could be judged.

Other themes did appear, of course. Stories in the *New York Times* (Fink, 1989), *Boston Globe* (Warsh, 1989), *American Demographics* (Townsend, 1990), and *Crain's Chicago Business* (Teller, 1995) drew lessons about leadership and proposed yardsticks against which the performance of CEOs

could be judged. However, crisis management remained the dominant frame. In such stories, Johnson & Johnson and Exxon were cited as examples to help explain every new crisis, whether caused by defective products, airline crashes, or industrial accidents. Almost any occasion for bad publicity came to be labeled a crisis. Thus Tylenol and Valdez were thought relevant benchmarks by which to judge the response of George W. Bush, Sr., during the 1991 Gulf War (Fetterman, 1991), of Congressman Gary Condit in the Chandra Levy case (Troxler, 2001), of the university president's response to the hazing death of a Massachusetts Institute of Technology student (McGrory, 2000), and of the city of Toronto to its tarnished image, in the wake of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic (Dunne, 2003). Such comparisons sometimes obscured the ethical implications of different crises, as when the director of Union Carbide spoke to the Greater Cleveland chapter of PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) on the two crises his company had recently faced—the death of thousands in Bhopal, India, and the company's success at fighting a hostile takeover ("February program," 1990).

If the proximity and symmetry of the Tylenol and Valdez cases made them available for comparison, reporters' sourcing habits reinforced the fable. During the Valdez crisis of 1989, reporters began calling on public relations, crisis management experts, and business school professors to help them interpret the implications of the oil spill. From the start, those experts compared Exxon to Johnson & Johnson. In April, Dick Pearson, chairman of Pearson, Thomas Levy King & White public relations in Tampa, told the *St. Petersburg Times* that Exxon's problem "just hasn't been handled as well" as Johnson & Johnson's problem had (Otterbourg, 1989). Three months later, Albert Tortella, executive vice president of Burson-Marsteller, invoked the same comparison when talking to another *Times* reporter about the crisis management profession (Albright, 1989). Tortella, who advised Union Carbide on the Bhopal disaster and Johnson & Johnson on the Tylenol crisis, faulted Exxon, by comparison, for underreacting.

Through the 1990s, expert sources regularly offered the Johnson & Johnson–Exxon comparison as conventional wisdom. Wicke Chambers and Spring Asher, principals in a speech and media training firm, wrote in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* that Exxon and Johnson & Johnson were "the classic examples of the wrong and right attitudes that can be used when speaking to the public through the media" (Chambers & Asher, 1991). Harlan Teller, chairman of U.S. corporate practice for Burson-Marsteller, wrote in *Crain's Chicago Business* that the two cases showed the importance of CEOs being willing to "put themselves on the line publicly" during a crisis (Teller, 1995, p. 13). Dennis McGrath, managing director of Shandwick USA, cited the Tylenol case as the standard for good crisis communication and the Valdez as a bungled response (Merrill, 1995).

These sources all offered the Tylenol–Exxon Valdez comparison as a commonplace, assumed to be instantly intelligible to both reporter and reader. Occasionally the experts disagreed on tactics (should Exxon CEO Lawrence Rawl have visited Valdez personally, or simply have been more responsive to media inquiries regardless of his location?), and they did cite other examples. However, not a single expert cited in dozens of news stories we read ever discounted the Tylenol–Valdez comparison as inappropriate (though practitioner–educator Carole Gorney, 2002, recently argued in a professional journal that the Tylenol standard is outdated and misleading). Public relations professionals themselves, often executives at large, well-respected agencies, planted the idea with reporters that Johnson & Johnson and Exxon are the standards, good and bad, by which they would like their profession to be judged.

Conclusions

"Self-making," the psychologist Jerome Bruner (2002) reminded us, is a narrative art. Bruner could as easily have said "group-making." Every profession talks itself into existence through narrative, ritual, and fable. Groups tell stories to affirm who they are—what challenges they face, what skills they need, what members of their tribe have accomplished, and, most important, what they stand for. Tylenol and Valdez are just such stories. Fishman (1996) has argued that there are good reasons why Tylenol and Valdez have come to be considered paradigmatic cases of crisis communication. Whatever their practical lessons for crisis managers, however, they have not earned the moral weight that commentators have placed on them.

The social interactions that frame professional choices remain unobserved, leading to three faulty conclusions about the ethics of public relations.

The social interactions that frame professional choices remain unobserved, leading to three faulty conclusions about the ethics of public relations. First, the Tylenol–Valdez fable locates our moral evaluation in the wrong place—in the success of each case's external outcomes rather than in the quality of each company's deliberations. Second, the fable, because constantly retold, reduces ethics to proverbial wisdom: Johnson & Johnson

was good because it released information and Exxon bad because it withheld information. Third, the fable treats moral behavior as episodic, as a heroic individual act rather than a commitment to mindfulness.

Because public relations case studies, by narrative convention, have focused more on outcomes than on processes, even apparent references to ethics may mean little. For example, accounts of the Tylenol case often cite Johnson & Johnson's credo in guiding that company's behavior, but the evidence shows only that Johnson & Johnson invoked the credo in retrospect, as a story about how virtue had allowed the company to survive such a terrible crisis. Just how the credo figured in Johnson & Johnson's decision is less clear, and it is not certain the social responsibility was the very first principle honored in deciding on a course of action. After all, Walgreen's and other retailers pulled Tylenol off the shelves in hundreds of stores before the company did. The Food and Drug Administration had instigated efforts to require tamper-resistant packaging years before Johnson & Johnson reintroduced Tylenol in a triple-seal bottle (Berg & Robb, 1992). What role public relations professionals' advice played in the company's two most widely heralded ethical acts—removing the product and offering tamper-resistant packaging—is never fully explained.

Such ethical assertions reduce complex patterns of corporate behavior to simple, proverbial wisdom. The Tylenol–Exxon Valdez fable credits or blames public relations for the success or failure of the public's response, whether public relations guided the company's decisions. As practitioners know, financial and legal considerations often trump the concern for moral reputation or long-term relationships with publics. Practitioners may advise top management on strategies for handling crisis communication, but they should not receive all the praise or all the blame when that advice is or is not followed. Cases, as currently written, generally fail to capture this bureaucratic complexity. Seen from a sociological perspective, a crisis response is the trace left by the laborious collaborations of an organization's public relations advisors, financial officers, managers, and lawyers, among others. The most difficult ethical work of public relations occurs in just such settings.

As we have seen, journalism's habits of framing and sourcing encouraged reporters to compare the two cases, and to reduce that comparison to a moral platitude. The actual behavior of the companies does not neatly fit such stereotypes, however. Berg and Robb (1992) argued that there are good reasons why Tylenol should not be viewed as *the* exemplar of good public relations. Although the product itself was not harmful to the public, the company could have offered tamper-resistant packaging earlier (as the government had encouraged). In its recall advertisements, Johnson & Johnson kept its name out of the ads announcing the Tylenol exchange programs so as not to tarnish its other brands. The company's virtue was

not as timeless as the praise of its credo implied. Mitroff (2001) reminded us that the company was less forthcoming, years later, when children were shown to have suffered liver damage or died from overdoes of Tylenol (p. 20). Similarly, although Exxon was widely criticized for the tardiness of its cleanup, its efforts were dictated in many instances by requests of the Coast Guard and the state of Alaska (Fearn-Banks, 2002).

Finally, the Tylenol–Exxon Valdez fable too easily imagines morality as the courage of top executives to make tough, on-the-spot decisions. May's (1996) approach, however, suggests that we ought to pay closer attention to the social processes that enable or constrain professional integrity and social responsibility. Treating ethics as a heroic response undervalues the steady, conscientious struggle needed to behave honorably toward each stakeholder. The recent emphasis on crises, while seductive and flattering, is misleading. Crises represent only a small proportion of the work done by practitioners. It is work performed under extraordinary pressure and time constraints, in the public eye, under intense media scrutiny, and with enormous stakes, such as the loss of life, property, or market value. Emphasizing crises encourages us to think of public relations as most real, authentic, and valuable when practitioners are responding to an emergency.

We believe that the Tylenol–Exxon Valdez fable has narrowed our understanding of the ethical dilemmas confronting public relations. It is much easier to appear to act ethically, after all, as in the Tylenol case, when an evil outsider has instigated the crisis. So, in a sense, the Tylenol–Exxon Valdez fable controls the range of the debate and trims its stakes by excluding more troubling and morally problematic corporate behaviors. In the Tylenol case, people died, but the company was not to blame. In the Valdez case, the company was to blame, but no person died as a direct consequence. Surely the most difficult ethical cases are those in which people die and the company is to blame, as with the explosion of Union Carbide's Bhopal plant or the lawsuits over unsafe products such as breast implants, faulty tires, or asbestos.

Mitroff (2001) maintained that crises may be an inevitable by-product of social and technological complexity, a sign of our inability to foresee and control all the consequences of our collective behavior. If he is right, then Tylenol–Exxon Valdez may be too feeble a story with which to think the ethics of the field.

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