

NBC's *Tonight Show* Switch:
The Decision That Rocked Late Night

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Background of Crisis

Introduction

In January 2010, National Broadcasting Company (NBC) executives decided to revamp the late night lineup just eight months after an already significant change. What began as a plan to increase ratings backfired into a public relations disaster for NBC and Jeff Zucker, the NBC President. The change would have pushed *The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien* back 30 minutes to accommodate a shorter version of *The Jay Leno Show*. After the announcement of the proposed changes and the public refusal of *The Tonight Show* host Conan O'Brien, a media firestorm, largely based in social media networks, demanded a solution to the problem, restitution for O'Brien and accountability from NBC. What viewers got instead was a poorly managed battle over contracts, television shows, egos, and millions of dollars- all played out on television and the Internet.

About the Crisis

In 2004, NBC negotiated a deal that would cement their late night lineup for years to come. At that time, NBC saw much success with both their late night programs, with Jay Leno bringing in ratings, and Conan O'Brien appealing to younger demographics. On March 30, NBC announced it had reached an agreement with Jay Leno to remain as host of *The Tonight Show* until the end of 2009, but made no comment about Conan O'Brien that day but the speculation about his future at NBC was all over the press. The offers began rolling in for O'Brien to host other shows on Fox and ABC, but O'Brien held out for *The Tonight Show*, which was his dream job ever since he saw Johnny Carson host it when he was little. O'Brien has to wait six months when on September 27, he stepped into the NBC executive offices in the fifty-second floor of 30 Rock, picked up a pen, and signed his name to the contract that promised to make him the next

host of *The Tonight Show*. In a press release that went out that day, NBC announced that Jay Leno, the long-time host of the popular late night *Tonight Show* would leave his hosting duties after 17 years, and that Conan O'Brien would take over as host. The only quote in the release was a crafted statement from Jay who said, "When I signed my new contract, I felt that the timing was right to plan for my successor, and there is no one more qualified than Conan. Plus I promised my wife, Mavis, I would take her out for dinner before I turned sixty," (Carter, 2010, p. 52). NBC deliberately shunned answering any press questions, leaving it up to Jay, who did not want to repeat the public controversy when he replaced Johnny Carson in 1992.

The *Tonight Show* baton was passed from Leno to O'Brien in typical Hollywood passion-in front of the cameras. Entertainment leaders, celebrities and guests arrived to watch the NBC "upfront week" – a long-standing television industry rite of spring during which the broadcast networks trot out their newly selected programs for the fall in hopes of luring cash commitments from advertisers. Though Leno appeared and delivered a funny monologue, it became clear to Zucker that Leno was not ready to retire as anticipated. In order to keep the ratings cash cow, Zucker came up with an unprecedented move to give Leno his own variety show, and would axe five scripted shows to make room for the five hours of primetime for Leno. For Zucker, a move like this would accomplish several goals at once. It would take Jay off the market, while at the same time protecting Conan and *The Tonight Show*. It also left NBC only needing to fill the eight-to-ten p.m. hours with other entertainment programming. With five fewer hours a week for NBC Entertainment to supply, the cost savings would surely be significant (Carter, 2010).

A month later, NBC began premiered their new late night lineup, *The Jay Leno Show* at 10 p.m. and *The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien* at 11:35 p.m. Conan's premier pulled more than 9 million viewers that night, more than triple David Letterman's audience, and more than

anything on television that evening in primetime. He also pulled a 3.8 rating among the 18-49 audience, utterly dominating among the younger audience segments. But over the course of the premiere week, NBC began to see pattern- viewers over the age of 50, many of them presumably Jay Leno fans, started to check out. *The Jay Leno Show* began seeing drops in ratings as well, testing the patience of NBC's affiliates. Ratings for the top 44 affiliates show an average drop of 13 percent after just six weeks of the *Jay Leno Show*. The larger markets saw significant drops including New York down 22 percent, Philadelphia down 37 percent, and Miami down 30 percent (Ware, 2009). For NBC Entertainment executives, the affiliates frustration of losing viewers, once public would surely descend into nastiness. If the affiliates started bad-mouthing Jay and the decision to put him at ten, Leno would surely be damaged, perhaps irrevocably. Because of the pay-and-play contract that Leno and NBC signed in 2004, NBC opted to find a creative solution to keeping Jay on the air, instead of paying him the estimated \$60 million for breaking the contract.

The proposed decision was leaked to the press on January 7, 2010. In an article by The Daily Beast, it was reported that NBC's decision made sense from their perspective, but noted that there were no comments from the two people the change would affect the most, O'Brien and Leno. NBC declined to comment on that particular issue, but did release a brief statement,

“We have the best comedy team in the business. We remain committed to keeping Conan O'Brien on NBC. He is a valued part of our late night lineup, as he has been for more than 16 years and is one of the most respected entertainers in television,” (NBC Universal, January 7, 2010).

Despite the statement, rumors began flying about NBC letting one of its top comedians walk. A few days later during the network's portion of the TCA Press Tour, NBC Television Entertainment Chief Jeff Gaspin said, "I can confirm, starting February 12, *The Jay Leno Show* will no longer air at 10 p.m. While [Leno] was performing at acceptable levels for the network, it did not meet our affiliates' needs, and we realized we had to make a change," (Ausiello, 2010).

A few days later, after heated discussions with NBC executives, and reading reports that his show would be canceled, Conan released a press statement regarding the late night changes. The release opened with the aptly titled, "People of Earth" and continued with O'Brien adamantly stating that he was not willing to move *The Tonight Show* timeslot.

"After only seven months, with my *Tonight Show* in its infancy, NBC has decided to react to their terrible difficulties in prime time by making a change in their long-established late night schedule.

I sincerely believe that delaying the *Tonight Show* into the next day to accommodate another comedy program will seriously damage what I consider to be the greatest franchise in the history of broadcasting. The *Tonight Show* at 12:05 simply isn't the *Tonight Show*.

My hope is that NBC and I can resolve this quickly so that my staff, crew, and I can do a show we can be proud of, for a company that values our work." (O'Brien, 2010).

The onslaught of media that bashed NBC came hurtling soon after. NBC found itself in the middle of a public backlash over a decision that was yet to be finalized. And as

quickly as it started, the media circus began to grow, specifically in support for O'Brien - blogs, Twitter feeds, and Facebook Groups all in support of "Team CoCo." The online conversation displayed resentment from the post-baby-boom generation at what they saw as another example of baby boomers nailing their feet to the stage and not letting go.

The amount of bashing on Jay Leno and NBC became a bit overwhelming for executive Dick Ebersol, who agreed to a New York Times interview that was published on January 15, amidst contract negotiations. In the interview, Ebersol called O'Brien "chicken-hearted and gutless to blame a guy you couldn't beat in the ratings," adding that "what this is really all about is an astounding failure by Conan. I like Conan enormously personally, he was just stubborn about not being willing to broaden the appeal of his show," (Carter, 2010b). Three days later, Jeff Zucker represented NBC's side of the story when he appeared on the Charlie Rose Show to discuss the situation.

After more than a week of heated discussions, hurt egos, and passive threats, NBC and Conan O'Brien reached an agreement- O'Brien will relinquish his hosting duties, and NBC would pay him \$45 million per his contract. On January 21, 2010, NBC released a statement about the agreement, and began to work on rebuilding from the damage that the last ten days had generated.

Defining the Crisis

The NBC late night crisis was much more than a public relations problem for NBC. Once public, the crisis generated much more buzz than NBC had anticipated, particularly because of social media. The buzz was overwhelmingly negative towards NBC, which was pinged as the bad guy, and showed poor management towards the situation. All eyes were seemingly on NBC executives, and pressure was on to find some

sort of solution for the players involved, particularly O'Brien, who essentially took on a victim persona against the large corporate giant that is NBC. Millar and Heath (2004) describe a crisis as an event that has "consequences for stakeholders' interests as well as the reputation for the organization suffering the crisis, (p. 2). The situation at NBC thrust them even more onto the public stage, and put a spotlight on their management and programming decisions, that have been falling for years previous. The damaging accusations that NBC had to deal with, along with the pressure to make a timely defense, make this crisis a construct crisis. For NBC, the late night crisis was an emergent crisis, as executives knew they would be dealing with a lame-duck situation for five years, since the contracts were signed in 2004 and the changes would not take place until 2009. The crisis only escalated as a result of NBC's unwillingness to discuss the situation with the talent, as well as the public.

To better understand the severity of the crisis, the Crisis Severity Index is used to examine the crisis as both an act and a construct. The nature of the charges during the crisis was between moderate and strong for NBC, as the main purpose of the NBC Entertainment branch is to provide programming that audiences will enjoy, and NBC was not doing that. The crisis also charged that NBC was inept in their management of contracts and business decisions. The extent of the crisis was moderate, as it only affected the NBC Entertainment department, not NBC in general. Of course, the damage of the crisis extends to the whole company as a brand. Those directly affected by the crisis was just a handful of people, including Conan O'Brien and Jay Leno, but the crisis itself reached to millions of viewers and audience members as it played out publicly. The clarity of the crisis was strong as it was clear that NBC needed to make a decision about

their lineup, and that the decision was handled poorly. NBC has dealt with a previous crisis regarding their late night lineup in 1992 when Johnny Carson retired. The precedence of the crisis was also handled poorly as it caused much uproar to audience members, and damaged the network's management and business practices. The power of the accusers in this crisis was strong. O'Brien proved he was poignant among younger demographics by joining social networks, and rallying public support for his decision. The accusers were powerful because they used social media networks and the Internet to blast NBC and Leno as much as they could through blog posts, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, etc. NBC had control over the crisis, and could have very well avoided the whole thing had they managed the contracts and decisions better, but once the crisis was made public; NBC had little control over the crisis. As stated earlier, the Internet and social media became a much more powerful source of information than NBC could deal with. The visual dimension of the crisis is rather strong as the whole situation was played out all over the television. Conan O'Brien was still continuing his show, and would poke jabs at NBC, as did other late night show hosts including David Letterman. The extent of harm was very high for NBC, low for audience members. For NBC, they were going to spend millions in either scenario, which would have been a hit for any network. But the extent of harm does not expand past the corporation in terms of damage. Though some viewers may not have liked the lineup, the crisis largely did not affect everyday lives.

About NBC

The National Broadcast Company began in 1926 as a radio broadcasting company. Since then, NBC has grown to become a major television network with nearly 200 national affiliates, and many divisions including NBC News, MSNBC, NBC Sports, NBC Olympics, and NBC

Entertainment, the entity in charge of late night programming. During the time of the crisis, NBC was owned by General Electric, and has since partnered with Comcast to form NBC Universal. According to the company website, NBC Universal is one of the world's media and entertainment companies that features a portfolio of news and entertainment television networks, a film company, and world-renowned theme parks. The scope of the company is wide, as it draws in millions of viewers across its many television channels.

Selection of Damage Control Messages

The messages that NBC Entertainment released regarding the late night crisis was sparse. NBC released several brief, one-sentence statements throughout the crisis, and all were nearly attributed as an "NBC spokesperson." These messages were largely impersonal and crafted sentences that were reported in media and news articles. One of these statements includes the press releases that NBC sent out after the contract agreements with O'Brien. Interestingly enough, NBC used traditional means of media, specifically, print and news outlets to get their message across, and chose to avoid responding to social media prompts. A few of the messages were released through interviews during the TCA Press Tour. The more prominent pieces of damage control messages, which will largely be used in the analysis, include two interviews by key NBC executives. The first being a New York Times interview with executive Dick Ebersol, and an on-air interview NBC President Jeff Zucker had on the Charlie Rose Show. These interviews presented a much more personal, and less rehearsed message.

These various messages will be used to analyze the ways that NBC attempts to recover from their late night crisis. The messages will help explain what the purpose, persona, and propositions NBC attempted to portray, and how these messages explain the strategies that NBC used in regaining the public's trust, and taking responsibility for the crisis.

Description of Damage Control Messages

Purposes

The purpose of the NBC interviews and statements was to respond to the overwhelming response that viewers and the public had over the situation, and to restore their public image. NBC sought to do this by redefining the situation, as there were a lot of assumptions and speculations about what happened and what lead NBC to make the decision that they did. NBC President Jeff Zucker interviewed with several media outlets including CNBC, but the most prominent interview was with Charlie Rose, which aired on January 18, 2010.

During this interview, Zucker sought to clear up confusion about the whole situation, and went into as much detail as he could in regards to the contract agreements, NBC's ratings problems and the pressure they received from their affiliates. The interview spent some time on explaining the details about the situation and how NBC got there, including the 2004 contracts. From the way that Zucker was describing the situation, audiences and those upset seemed to misunderstand the situation, that this was not a personal attack on Conan, and that they were not favoring Leno over O'Brien. Explaining the Leno Show at 10 p.m. decision, Zucker made it clear the decision was a business one.

“There were a lot of reasons we looked at the 10:00 time period in broadcast television and made a decision both from an evolutionary position in television in the way people were watching cable television, the way people were recording the programs that are on at 10:00 and watching them on their DVR – digital video recorder. We thought this would be an alternative for them and would be a way for us also to think about being smarter about the way we spent our resources in

primetime television,” Zucker rationalized. “It turns out we made miscalculations with regard to that.”

NBC also sought to defend their decision, and framed as a business decision, not one filled with personal vendettas and rivalries, as the media has portrayed it.

“Well, look, obviously we made a business decision here. And so we believe we’ve made the right business decision,” said Zucker. “You know, what Conan decides to do, obviously, is up to Conan. And we don’t wish him any ill will at all. He’ll make a decision that’s in his best interest, but we’ve made a business decision that’s in our best interest, and that’s really what we’re supposed to do. We’re supposed to make hard business decisions without any personal feelings. And that’s what we’re supposed to do, that’s what we’ve done here,” (Rose & Vega, 2010).

By framing the whole situation as a business decision, NBC hopes to defend their decision, and ultimately, to get viewers and the public to understand their side of the story, and to understand that much thought went into the decision.

Persona

NBC’s persona during the crisis has been portrayed very consistently in the media, and it never looked pretty for the corporation. News and entertainment articles typically casted NBC in a “doomsday” light saying the network was “faced with the failure of the biggest recent gamble in television” (Carter, 2010c). Portrayed as the bad guy, NBC sought to maintain a unified, corporate, persona when responding directly about the crisis. Presumably, this was in direct response to reports and accusations that Zucker sought to cut Conan out of the lineup based on his more favorable relationship with Leno. If Zucker talked about the decision on behalf of the

company, and explained it as in the best interest of NBC, there would cause less talk about Zucker's personal reputation, which has not always been flattering for the company. His role during the crisis was a superior role, and drew on his knowledge and experience in the entertainment industry.

“We need to be straight that NBC Entertainment in primetime over the last five years has not done well enough. And we have to do better and we have to find bigger, broader, better shows. And the truth is that really has defined NBC and NBC Universal... and I think that's what's so unfortunate about the – for the 30,000 employees who work at NBC Universal, for the folks in our cable division, in our firm division, in our theme parks division, the folks at NBC News and NBC Sports, the fact that our failure to do better at NBC Entertainment has unfortunately defined us. I always say that NBC Entertainment is responsible for five percent of our bottom line and 95 percent of our perception,” (Rose & Vega, 2010).

By describing that NBC Entertainment is a small portion of a much larger parent company, Zucker attempts, in some ways, to detach that particular branch from the overall corporation, while at the same time framing the late night switch as in the best interest of the company. Though he had an overconfident demeanor in public, there was no doubt that Zucker was one of the smartest businessmen in the industry, and one who often took risks. During his interview with Charlie Rose, Zucker did just that- he talked about the situation based on the company's perspective, but his knowledge of the situation and the industry was often overshadowed by his seemingly arrogant and annoyed tone. By establishing this corporate persona, NBC makes their decision about the crisis being a business decision more coherent and rational.

Propositions

NBC's central argument during the crisis was to defend its decision, and show that they acted justifiably when faced with a tough decision. By laying out exactly the predicament that NBC was in, the company sought to rationalize their reasoning behind the late night changes- the company was just trying to find a reasonable solution.

“I think it's the sign of a leader to step up and say, you know, when something's not working to have the guts to reverse it. And the worst thing you can do is to let that mistake linger. And really that's what we've tried to do here. Sometimes you don't know these things until you try them. We tried to correct something that didn't work. Leadership is about taking chances and taking risks... and acknowledging when they don't work,” (Rose & Vega, 2010).

During the interview, Zucker also sought to defend his decisions in 2004 regarding Leno's and O'Brien's contracts.

When asked whether it was a mistake, Zucker responded, “I think actually that was the right decision at that time and I have no regrets about that. I'm a big enough boy to know that I have to accept responsibility when things don't work. I go back and said, you know, I'm happy to step up and take responsibility for things that don't work,” (Rose & Vega, 2010).

By framing the decision, and being able to explain the calculated rationale behind the decision, NBC and Zucker show that the decision was made in the best interest of the show, network and ultimately the audience.

Analysis of Messages

Selection of Critical Framing

To closely examine and analyze the ways in which NBC dealt with their late night crisis, two frames will be used. The Narrative Frame by Robert Heath is a frame that explains how “a crisis event constitutes a rhetorical exigency that requires one or more responsible parties to enact control in the face of uncertainty in an effort to win key publics’ confidence and meet their ethical standards,” (Heath, 2004, p. 167). This frame is relevant to the NBC crisis because there are many meanings co-created by the organization, media and key publics that allow for many commentators who seek a rational explanation of the event. NBC should have sought to maintain a narrative response to the crisis because as homonarians, the telling of a story helps publics to “conclude that the organization is willing and able to shoulder responsibility for its activities and their consequences as well as maintain or regain control over its operations,” (Heath, 2004, p. 170). Foss, as quoted in Heath (2004) explains that the narrative as a frame can be used as an argument that helps to view and understand the situation in a particular way, and by analyzing the narrative, we can better understand the argument being made, and the likelihood that it’ll be successful in gaining adherence to the argument. The narrative frame calls for analysis of the crisis reporting, crisis response, and the competing narratives of the crisis.

The second frame that will be used to analyze NBC’s damage control messages is B.L. Ware and Will A. Linkugel’s *Factors of Verbal Self-Defense*, which is based on the practice of publicly defending oneself. The authors explain, “Factor analytic theory... serves merely as a source for a new departure in thought with regard to the criticism of public address,” (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 274). The authors found that there are four prevalent factors in the study of this apologetic form, denial, differentiation, bolstering, and transcendence.

Application of Critical Framing

Heath (2004) describes the narrative frame as a framework for understanding the past, knowing the present, and projecting actions for the future, which is used in both the crisis reporting and response for NBC's late night switch.

Crisis reporting as a narrative would largely discuss the past, present and future of the NBC late night lineup. The stories would make sense because they often expressed why people did what they did, and why the events occurred. In a New York Times article, journalist Bill Carter correlates a past event to one that NBC recently dealt with, "One reason NBC took the risky step of moving Mr. Leno to prime time was to avoid having one of its late-night stars become a competitor, a situation that NBC came to regret when David Letterman left NBC in the 1990s to start a show at CBS," (Carter, 2010c).

Reports would often frame the crisis as a war, using metaphors prominently in the headlines. For example, "The War for Late Night", "Jay Tries to Make Nice While Conan Rallies the Troops", and "NBC and Conan Continue to Slug It Out in Public." These war metaphors are dramatic, and draw vivid images that only increase the conflict and drama of the narratives in question.

In contrast to that, NBC did not use war metaphors even internally to motivate employees. NBC did this strategically because they did not want to deal with a divided company, in which employees, viewers, and the public would be forced to side with Conan or NBC. For the company, it was better to have a seemingly united front that worked together to find common ground. Of course, the narrative that was reported was largely more interesting and dramatic because of these war metaphors.

NBC's crisis response as a narrative sought to frame a cohesive story that helps explain the reasoning behind their decision. The factual story itself has background information that dates back to as early as 1992, verifying just how complicated the situation became. By responding to the crisis as a narrative, NBC is able to tell the story about the crisis, at least how they saw it from the past, present and future of the show. Zucker frames the company, in some aspects, as a hero trying to find a solution to their problem and trying to help O'Brien's ratings, saying, "We thought ultimately this would – this would give him a stronger lead-in from Jay at 11:35, and we thought ultimately it would give Conan more flexibility to do the show that he's most comfortable with. At the end of the day, if he couldn't accept his show being on 30 minutes later, that was his prerogative and his right," (Rose & Vega, 2010).

Later on during the interview, Zucker represents himself as a victim, in some cases martyr, of the story by mentioning how he's been receiving death threats, and how the public bashing he's received is really inconsistent with the actual severity of the crisis. Of course, the other characters of the narrative are often mentioned including O'Brien, and Leno, the seemingly innocent bystander caught between the crossfire, according to NBC.

In his interview with the New York Times, Dick Ebersol implies that the real villain in the situation is O'Brien, who simply could not accept that his program was doing badly in the ratings, and sought a scapegoat in Leno and NBC. Bill Carter (2010b) writes, "Referring to the pointed jokes made this week by Mr. O'Brien and David Letterman of CBS, Mr. Ebersol said it was 'chicken-hearted and gutless to blame a guy you couldn't beat in the ratings.'"

To judge whether these crisis narratives have integrity, one must examine the narratives' probability (the extent to which a story holds together, rings true and is free from contradiction) and fidelity (the weight of values, good reasons, consequences, and consistency), as described by

Heath (2004). Narrative probability includes an analysis of the events that happened in the past, present, and future of the crisis. A narrative that focuses solely on the present situation misses the rhetorical exigency of addressing these key parts, which NBC does not avoid. The corporation's crisis response attempted to tell the whole story of how the crisis came to be about, what went wrong, and how they were going to fix it. The narrative does not have structural coherence in that there is not a logical set of principles that guides NBC's decision. Although Zucker attempts to rationalize how the decision was not personal, many publics will most likely only see the carelessness that NBC put in their contract agreements, the lame-duck situation and the handling of the ratings problems, which affects NBC's proposed guiding principles, which seems arbitrary to the everyday viewer. Material coherence plays a major factor in NBC's attempt to tell their story. First, the rhetor in this case, Jeff Zucker, is known for being a bottom-line businessman who likes to take risks. The public already saw this a few months before the crisis when NBC made the decision to cut five primetime programs to make room for the *Jay Leno Show*, which was proved to be an utter failure for NBC and their affiliates.

The response narrative that NBC used must also demonstrate narrative fidelity, which Heath (2004) explains as, "The critical standard for judging fidelity is that of the logic of good reasons: 'matters of fact, relevance, consequence, consistency and transcendental issues,'" (p. 179). For NBC, the matters of fact are simply stated in the talent's contracts, with which NBC based their decisions. These facts were relevant in that NBC used them to provide proof that they were held to certain agreements, and the consequences of breaking those agreements were extensive for the company. NBC was consistent in their message of trying to find a solution to the problem, most of the press statements released were in regards to working with all those involved to come up with an agreement that works for everyone by using transcendence.

These two competing narratives played out for a week during the NBC crisis. For the company and certainly Jeff Zucker, it was tough for them to get past the war metaphors used in the crisis response narratives. The media circus that swirled around the crisis made it particularly rough for NBC, who attempted to detail a complicated, long and chaotic story of how the situation came about amidst the more prominent social media messages. While both stories are plausible to audiences, the more memorable and dramatic one that was being reported received much more notoriety than the song NBC was singing. The case of NBC's late night crisis is a great example of how the general public, once motivated, is the ultimate controllers of the story.

The Factors of Verbal Self-Defense will also be used to analyze the damage control messages that NBC used. Ware & Linkugel (1973) describes that a rhetor attempts to reconcile a derogatory charge using four common types of factors used in speeches of self-defense.

The first is denial, which is reformative in that it that speaker denounces any participation the charges. For NBC, there was never any denial on their part of the crisis. In fact, during his interview with Charlie Rose, Jeff Zucker admits the decision did not work, but that they were going to fix it saying, "Frankly, we need to do a better job. We've got a new management team in place at NBC Entertainment. I'm hopeful that in the coming months and the coming year, we'll do better. The only way that we get this behind us is if we do better," (Rose & Vega, 2010)

The second Factor of Self-Defense is differentiation, which Ware & Linkugel (1973) describe as "the division of the old context into two or more new constructions of reality is accompanied by a change in the audience's meanings," (p. 273). NBC defines the situation not as a personal problem that was being portrayed, but as a ratings problem. Zucker puts it simply in his interview, "At the end of the day, it didn't work well enough for our affiliates and our TV stations," adding that "None of this is personal, none of this is personal. The decisions we made

here were a business decision. We're talking about a program- we're talking about moving a program back a half-hour, a program that was not making money for us at NBC," (Rose & Vega, 2010). The authors point out that the factor of differentiation is important in public apology in that it is often signaled by the request to suspend judgment until the actions can be viewed from a different perspective, which NBC does not directly do. By differentiating between the business decision and a personal decision, NBC hopes to gain some slack for the decision they made.

The third factor of self-defense is bolstering, or the rhetorical strategy that reinforces the corporation's reputation or goodwill. Zucker does this at the very onset of the interview in which he says that NBC is much more than their Entertainment department, they participate in news, sports, the Olympics, etc. By bolstering the company's impressive resume and acquisitions, NBC attempts to change the audiences' image of NBC being an evil company.

The final factor of self-defense is transcendence. Ware & Linkugel (1973) define this as a factor that "takes in any strategy which cognitively joins some fact, sentiment, object, or relationship with some larger context within which the audience does not presently view," (p. 280). This factor psychologically moves the audience away from the problem, and helps them focus on a larger issue. NBC uses transcendence as a way to move past the problem, ultimately comparing it to a learned lesson. Zucker states, "I'm a believer in rolling the dice, in taking chances... they don't always work out. Nothing tried, nothing gained. The worst thing to come out of this would be if the lesson is 'don't take a chance.' If we're going to get better, you have to take a chance," and "The amount of heat and scorn that has been put on this is really – is just completely out of whack to the degree of what really is important here," (Rose & Vega, 2010).

Combining transcendence and bolstering, as well as differentiation and bolstering, NBC uses a justificative and explanative posture to defend its late night decision. These postures are recognizable categories that address dominant strategies found in the apologia genre.

Ware & Linkugel (1973) describe that the explanative posture is a somewhat more defensive approach than the justification posture. They state, "In the explanative address, the speaker assumes that if the audience understands his motives, actions, beliefs, or whatever, they will be unable to condemn him. The justification address, on the other hand, asks not only for understanding, but also for approval," (Ware & Linkugel, 1973, p. 283). This helps explain why NBC sought to explain and justify their decision to change their late night lineup; instead of accepting their portrayal in crisis reporting, NBC wanted to defend their decisions.

Evaluation of Critical Framing

In evaluating the effectiveness of the narrative frame to the NBC crisis, one must keep in mind that Kenneth Burke, as cited in Cheney (1983) says there are three types of identification that makes for a successful narrative: association, disassociation and identification. NBC does a poor job in associating itself with its audience, but does attempt to disassociate them with the problem. Though identification was used in the form of transcendence, the narrative frame is largely successful only in helping NBC define and frame the situation. The narrative of the crisis allowed NBC to tell the story that they knew to be true, from the contracts in 2004 and beyond, and provided rationale for their business decision.

By using the Factors and Postures of Verbal Self-Defense, NBC was able to defend and justify the decisions that they made, and the predicament that they were in. NBC used bolstering, differentiation, and transcendence to distance emotions from their business decision as much as possible, allowing the spotlight to shine away from the most prevalent crisis.

Evaluation of Crisis Communication Campaign

Short Term Effects

Although NBC made a clear effort to clear up the air about the Conan crisis, the public reactions were not as receptive. NBC became the focus of most late night jokes, including their own, and terms around the entertainment industry included the “Leno effect” that did not bode well with NBC executives (Carter, 2010). Long after the ink dried on O’Brien’s new contract, social media sites were still creating negative press for NBC, and some even called for boycotts.

NBC also tried to move on from the crisis by promoting the return of *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*. They created several social media platforms to reach younger viewers including Facebook pages and a Twitter account, but the number of likes and followers was dismal compared to Conan’s “I’m with CoCo” campaign. The amount of backlash that NBC had to deal with was immense, as one social media analysts put it, the tone of blogs and Twitter “shifted from pro-Conan to decidedly anti-NBC,” (Stelter, 2010).

Despite the seeming contempt that most social media users had for NBC, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* saw its highest ratings in the weeks that followed the crisis. Though there was undoubtedly some NBC bashing on Conan O’Brien’s “Legally Prohibited from Being Funny on Television Tour” NBC seemed to be pulling the numbers they were seeking.

Long Term Effects

The ratings were bringing in the numbers that NBC needed, but many wondered how long the peacock network’s feathers would be tarnished. Just a year later, while the waters have calmed considerable, NBC’s handling of the crisis is still seen as one of the worst contract handlings in the entertainment industry (Carter, 2010). The fact that NBC allowed for most of the crisis to play out on screen showed the company lacked the management skills, particularly

Zucker. In an article that polled media buyers and analysts, about 37 percent agreed that NBC handled the situation in the worst possible manner, and nearly 75 percent said Jeff Zucker was the one who damaged his image the most (Media Buyer Planner, 2010).

In a recent CNN Money article, contributor Douglas Warshaw analyzed how Conan's camps use of social media was what won him his legions of fans and supporters during the crisis, and perhaps NBC's neglect of the powerful communication tools largely lead to its public bashing (Warshaw, 2011).

While NBC had a very public fall from grace, it seems they are bouncing back with the highest late night ratings for the *Tonight Show*. Conan O'Brien has also seemed to rebound in fashionable style with this new show on TBS, which boasts the younger demographics every night. In terms of finances, NBC seems to be regaining back its market shares, but the NBC late night change is bound to carry negative press for NBC in years to come.

Ethical Evaluation

The ethical evaluation of NBC's handling of the late night crisis represents some interesting problems. For the corporation, NBC executives made it a point to make sure that they were not breaking its contracts as Zucker was attempting to find a way to make sure both Conan and Jay to remain on the air. Perhaps Zucker's ambiguity throughout the crisis made it difficult for audiences to sympathize with the executive, who usually remained tight-lipped about his business transactions (Carter, 2010). Sellnow and Ulmer discuss organizational ambiguity as an "ongoing stream that supports several different interpretations at the same time," as quoted by Weick (Sellnow & Ulmer, 2004). NBC's lack of transparency in its business transactions, though common in the entertainment industry, is a tough sell to the public, particularly viewers. The authors says that ambiguity in a crisis situation may enable the organization to emphasize one

interpretation of the crisis over another, but in the case of NBC, the ambiguity allowed for open interpretation not from the company, but from other sources including the Internet and competitors. NBC's intentional ambiguity for their benefit causes an even larger ethical situation. Zucker's lack of discussion about the contracts, including specifics and even parameters, were not going to be discussed saying, "Well, look, obviously I'm not going to get into the details of the conversation," (Rose & Vega, 2010). Although highly likely that NBC was not legally allowed to discuss the contracts, Zucker's complete unwillingness to discuss it in the most general terms seemed off-putting. As Sellnow and Ulmer (2004) state, "Ambiguous messages may be deemed unethical, however, if they are not warranted, explicit and justifiable," (p. 255).

Viewers may not have been as upset with NBC's decision had NBC ethically considered the ramifications for their actions. One large mistake that Zucker made was providing little remorse for the decision he made, particularly regarding his approach to O'Brien. In his book, Bill Carter (2010) expresses a sentiment that most viewers agreed with, "Zucker continued to play a game of Rubik's Cube with the parts of the NBC Universal Empire, looking for the key that would make the colors line up for Jay," (p. 149). Perhaps Zucker approaching the problem as a typical business transaction led to the sentiment that NBC was simply trying to push Conan out of the lineup to make more money.

Comparative Evaluation

What makes the NBC late night crisis interesting is how immersed the public, particularly young viewers, were in the situation. Though they may not have had a lot invested in the shows, these viewers had a large amount of power over how the crisis was viewed because they used social media. This powerful source of listening to constituents, customers, and publics is often used as a way to prevent crisis, and create goodwill. For example, in July 2009, Southwest

Airlines took to Twitter to see how customers viewed their emergency landing for a flight. The team found many positive messages about the emergency landing, and used those Tweets to praise employees for a job well done. Coca-Cola is also another company that embraced social media to provide support for customers when they found an upset consumer who had trouble redeeming a prize. Coca-Cola used Twitter to reach out to the customer, and assisted him in redeeming his prize, at which he changed his avatar photo to him with a Coke product. Finally, Jet Blue is another great example of how social media can be used to promote goodwill. When a customer complained about not being able to sit with his family on Twitter, Jet Blue promptly tweeted him back in less than half an hour with a seat next to his family.

All three companies used social media as a way to listen to their customers, and provide an open communication line to show that they were listening. NBC did not use social media to address the situation, even though most of the bashing happened using Twitter hash tags and Facebook pages, instead NBC chose to embrace traditional means of media, alienating the niche of people that were the most upset over the change, and empowering them to create an uproar. By not responding to social media messages, NBC chose to ignore the viewers' comments, suggestions and questions, which is does not help the company when dealing with a crisis.

Industry Evaluation

An industry evaluation is also helpful in understanding how other corporations have dealt with a similar crisis, or at the very least, how they would respond. Jason Kravarik is a local news director and reporter for KSN, the Kansas affiliate for NBC. During a ten-minute phone interview with Kravarik, the news director explained how the local affiliate was affected by the crisis, and how they would have dealt with the situation. "Obviously the situation did affect KSN as we are the NBC affiliate for Kansas, and whatever NBC does with its lineup, greatly affects

our own local broadcast and of course our ratings,” said Kravarik. Though KSN did see some ratings drops with the Jay Leno Show, Kravarik stated that he was not sure if it was significant, and stated he was not entirely sure of all the details that went on during the deal as most other networks. “On a personal note, I think it was handled poorly, but it could have been worse. Of course, I understand that everything they do with the lineup is going to be under a large magnifying glass and that no matter what they do, it’ll be under scrutiny and there will always be critics,” said Kravarik. For KSN, who does have a crisis communication plan for breaking news, weather emergencies, and inaccuracies, the network tends to deal with crisis depending on the situation. Kravarik adds that the NBC crisis may not be the best example to have on the books, “I wouldn’t say that it is an example, but it does help us, and myself, remember the varied responses that we could get since we are such a public organization. We don’t make quite as much programming decisions in terms of lineups at the local level, however.”

Though NBC’s crisis is hardly a common occurrence, the network’s week of public relations hell is one for any industry to learn from. Even a healthcare financial management article covered the crisis saying, “If a decision is your last resort, it is probably a bad decision. Once NBC decided to move Leno to 10 p.m., many network leaders convinced themselves it was a good decision. But the reluctance with which the decision was made should have been a signal of impending disaster,” (Fromberg, 2010). NBC should have seen the crisis, or at the very least the juggernaut of a situation that they were in, months before the crisis seemingly exploded all over television. Though NBC sought to maintain their reputation and defend their decision, and though Jay Leno and Conan O’Brien were pushed along for the shuffle, NBC will most likely be remembered as the company that poorly managed the entire situation. With a year since the crisis, all the parties have seemed to have moved passed the week that rocked late night.

Appendix

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