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Crisis and Risk Communication or Propaganda and Disinformation: Rhetorical Strategies That Blur the Lines between Strategy and Manipulation

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Abstract: *The following analysis focuses on convergent areas between classical rhetorical strategies in strategic communication and propagandistic or deceptive discourse. Drawing on a framework based on critical cultural studies, it contends that corporate apology rhetoric may function as coercive communication approach, limiting audiences' interpretive agency and obstructing reflexive judgment. By screening impression management and reputation-repair strategies against modern disinformation techniques, it is shown that both rhetorical repertoires present structural vulnerability towards logical fallacies and various deceptive tropes. While research on disinformation has yielded significant insights into the mechanisms and ramifications of fake news, these findings have seldom been systematically incorporated into crisis and risk communication scholarship or practice. This article aims to address this gap by highlighting the conceptual and functional similarities between apologetic and deceptive rhetorical approaches. To disentangle crisis communication from propaganda, it is argued, a new language and rhetorical approach need to be developed.*

Keywords: *crisis and risk communication; disinformation techniques; logical fallacies; critical cultural studies.*

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Introduction

The 2016 US elections sparked scholarly interest in examining phenomena related to fake news (Gu et al., 2017), resulting in a significant accumulation of knowledge concerning various types, mechanisms, and effects of deceptive communication. Extensive research was conducted on predictors and vulnerability factors associated with disinformation in digital ecosystems, as well as conditions that bolster immunity to manipulative content. Crisis and risk communication researchers have historically warned that, in the absence of a stringent ethical framework, strategic discourse could devolve into institutional or corporate propaganda (Heath, 2010; Coombs, 2009). However, findings from disinformation studies have not significantly influenced this domain of research and practice. The literature review indicates that research on disinformation accounts only for additional deployment of crisis communication protocols aimed to manage infodemics (Shahbazi & Bunker, 2024; Opgenhaffen, 2023; Omojunikanbi, 2022). The discursive choices that make up the strategic response, on the other hand, are not usually carefully separated from manipulative rhetoric. The subsequent analysis addresses this deficiency by initiating the discussion on structural distinctions that should differentiate strategic communication from propaganda.

A prevalent definition of propaganda associates it with a collection of demonstrative actions and communion techniques intended to bypass deliberative cognitive processes (Quaranto & Stanley, 2021). The metaphor of the "closed mind" has been utilized in cultural and social psychology to illustrate how diverse representations of social events—despite being unreasoned or only partially reasoned—are integrated into collective cognitive frameworks. This weak social resistance to distorted thought categories derives from discursive, structural, and systemic practices that obstruct reflexivity, making it appear as an unnecessary cognitive endeavor (Quaranto & Stanley, 2021). Contemporary disinformation studies similarly pinpoint cognitive styles as primary predictors of susceptibility to false information, with reflective thinking associated with the ability to discern manipulation (Pennycook & Rand, 2020; Ross et al., 2019; Bialek & Pennycook, 2018).

Reflective thinking may be defined as a profound process of information processing, involving the examination of diverse life experiences and messages through internal mental dialogue. It helps individuals put their experiences into logical thought categories and come to appropriate conclusions. Conversely, intuitive or "fast thinking"—frequently referred to

as "instinctive mind"—circumvents cognitive effort by employing heuristics and peripheral cues associated with the form or context of information rather than its content (Pennycook & Rand, 2019). The Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) is a prominent instrument widely used to asses thinking style, in order to predict various variables, such as moral styles, ideological preferences, or vulnerability in front of manipulative or incoherent messages (Pennycook & Rand, 2020; Bago et al., 2020). There is, however, some disagreement about the effects of deliberative thinking. Some studies show that people with high analytical levels may develop more radical attitudes and, implicitly, be more open to some types of propaganda. Still, general conclusions suggest that there is an inverse relationship between someone's willingness to engage in reflective thinking and their vulnerability to manipulation (Bago et al., 2020).

Studies indicate that, apart from analytical thinking and information literacy—rooted in general or specialized knowledge—no other predictors consistently correlate with resistance to manipulative content (Dobber et al., 2021; Jones-Jang et al., 2021; Zyl et al., 2020). Thus, propagandistic rhetoric may be understood as discursive practices that circumvent deliberative processes. This definition will model the examination of intersections between disinformation tactics and rhetorical strategies employed in strategic communication. It is worth mentioning that deliberative and intuitive processing are often intertwined and individuals use both of them to order reality and assign it with meaning (Burič & Šrol, 2020). Consequently, evaluations should concentrate on the extent to which rhetorical responses impede reflective thinking, rather than their ability to elicit intuitive reactions. In crisis and risk contexts, communication strategies seek to cut through uncertainty and intensified perceptions on danger, accounting for audiences who might heavily resort to peripheral cues, in order to decode messages they are exposed to (Renn, 2008; Renn, 2001). However, taking vulnerability into account shouldn't enmesh strategic communication with propaganda.

Furthermore, discussions centered only on communication efficiency criteria fail to delineate a clear distinction between propaganda and strategic communication. Consequently, the concept of informed social consent regarding the meanings and significance of events may prove useful in drawing the lines between these two fields of communication. Bakir (2020) contends that informed consent distinguishes persuasive communication from coercive communication, a broad category that includes propaganda, social influence campaigns, and various forms of social engineering. Coercive communication can also be defined as communication systems used to limit

cognitive choices for a certain audience, conditioning individuals to display specific attitudes, emotions and behaviors in reaction to a specific topic. This result may be ensured through various methods, including controlled exposure to specific contents, through targeted messaging or general informational redundancy. Threat-driven communication environments are also considered to be conducive to restricted cognitive agency.

Informed consent, the optimal outcome of persuasive communication, entails decision-making grounded in accurate premises, supported by precise, adequate, and equitable information, delivered within a framework of decisional freedom (Bakir, 2020). As such, this analysis contrasts the rhetorical strategies of crisis and risk communication with manipulative or deceptive discourses, emphasizing their potential to either facilitate or obstruct deliberative and reflective processes while evaluating the validity of their foundational premises. Some authors, in fact, assert that the core objective of risk communication is not to convince the public that authorities' actions are right, but to enhance comprehension of decision-making rationales, to cultivate balanced perceptions grounded in factual data, and to promote informed individual choices that reflect both expert knowledge and personal values (Renn, 2009).

The framework of corporate apology, extended through research on impression management and reputation restoration, constitutes a traditional vein in crisis and risk communication (Coombs, 2009). However, as discussed below, these rhetorical repertoires frequently lack structural sensitivity to public need for adequate understanding during critical episodes. More often than not, such rhetorical responses are built by design to convince audiences of the righteousness of various decision makers and crisis managers who, otherwise, would be held responsible for how vulnerability was mitigated.

The first part of this paper examines the significant diversity in crisis and risk communication, which can be partially explained by the inherently political nature of these concepts, as they encompass culturally ascribed meanings, which are negotiated through social processes. The second section situates corporate apology rhetoric within cultural studies, highlighting how diverse worldviews are mirrored and exploited to sustain particular forms of cognitive conditioning, thus limiting interpretive frameworks which do not serve power preservation among elites. The third part explores rhetorical strategies derived from impression management and reputation restoration approaches, highlighting how they relate to common disinformation techniques. Their structural propensity to include pseudo-arguments and logical fallacies is examined in greater detail. The paper

concludes with considerations on whether an ethical and responsible framework of strategic communication may truly accommodate these traditional rhetorical approaches without collapsing into propaganda.

General framework: the volatile notional content of crisis and risk

Traditionally, a crisis situation used to be defined as an unexpected event that deeply disrupted an organization. A critical set of circumstances is qualified as a crisis if it affects material resources, harms the organizational reputation, and profoundly alters its relationships with society, at large, as well as with significant stakeholders (Coman, 2009). Pauchant and Mitroff (1992, in Coman, 2009) observe that crisis taxonomies frequently lack clarity, being ambiguously and fluidly composed. Common usage of the notion encompasses natural disasters, wars, environmental accidents, epidemics, road accidents, economic recessions, social and cultural disturbances, as well as various problems within administrative systems, as it happens when someone refers to political or educational crises. It may also refer to systemic strains, as inferred by notions such as social inequality crisis, basic rights crisis, or democracy crisis.

Pauchant and Mitroff (1992, in Coman, 2009) propose a family of related concepts comprising incidents, accidents, conflicts, and crises. They define incidents as events that only affect an organizational subsystem, without threatening its overall functioning. Accidents, on the other hand, are qualified as events that affect the whole organization and require a temporary halt to activity. However, although they may be conducive to reframing some of the organizational work processes, they don't compel an organization to change its operational model, nor do they critically alter organizational interactions with its stakeholders and the community, at large. Conflicts, on the other hand, affect the symbolic capital that an organization uses to prove its legitimacy. However, they don't threaten its core values. For example, disagreements among leaders may bring reputational costs and temporary internal disruptions but they are unlikely to lead to organizational dissolution. Finally, a crisis is supposed to have a deep destabilizing impact on the whole organization, both in terms of its material and symbolic value. Significantly, it sparks social debate about its structure, its modus operandi and its social and cultural legitimacy (Coman, 2009).

Crisis and risk management approaches, however, are built on the opposite assumption, firmly rejecting the conventional belief that crises would be inherently unpredictable events. By the opposite, the entire spectrum of disruptive event management, ranging from thorough risk assessment based on organizational and environmental analysis to the

deployment of control mechanisms, aimed at vulnerability reduction, and post-disruption recovery strategies, is supposed to be comprehensively anticipated and effectively planned. Heath (2010) underscores, for example, that vulnerability analyses do not encompass considerations of the likelihood of a crisis. On the contrary, a crisis is operationalized as an imminent event, arising from the catastrophic convergence of multiple inadequately managed risks. As thus, the core question in crisis and risk management is not *if* a crisis emerges, but *what type* of crisis is most likable to erupt and *under what circumstances*. Various types of crisis are assessed in conjunction with operational repertoires aimed at mitigating material, symbolic, social, and cultural impacts. Even though precise timelines cannot be foreseen, specific trajectories and different courses of events are, indeed, predicted, in order to plan appropriate sets of measures, composed either to delay a crisis, or to limit its disruptive unfolding, to downsize management costs and to curb general dynamics so that situational complexity would not escalade beyond the horizon of organizational capacity for control (Heath, 2010).

Crisis models identify various vulnerabilities within internal and external environments that may lead to disastrous consequences. Upon the onset of a crisis, predefined emergency actions and hierarchical priorities guide the response to contain escalation and maintain the effects within the organization's manageable thresholds (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). For instance, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the hegemonic official narrative, amplified by high-audience media, massively used, as a rhetorical strategy, the classical definition of crisis, as unexpected event. The World Health Organization, however, elaborated, as early as 2018, a warning report about the most likely future epidemics (Mehand et al., 2018). Drawing on predictive models, it outlined how the next health crisis will most probably unfold. Based on indicators related to population morbidity profiles, chronic disease prevalence, poverty risk, domestic hygiene standards, and migration trajectories, among others, states would've been able to assess their coping capacity when faced with such an event. Furthermore, health crisis models developed in the US as early as 2005 showed how a serious respiratory disease epidemic would play out (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). Based on data regarding current population health, social density, and mobility, estimates were made about the probable number of severe cases, the need for mechanical ventilation, the availability of masks and other medical devices, along with medical workforce assessments, among other operational contingences. The American report cautioned that failing to enact specific high priority measures in due time, such as procuring medical equipment, would cause significant situational

aggravation, adding new layers of complexity to the already critical context (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

Additionally, some researchers have explained the limited pandemic responses in the United Kingdom as a consequence of neoliberal policies implemented over the last twenty years. These policies are said to have progressively diminished the material and human resources of public agencies, weakening their institutional knowledge and expertise, while conditioning them to operate with undersized workforce, limited data access and fragile infrastructures (Rogers, 2020). Several studies indicate a causal relation between disorganized pandemic responses and the vulnerabilities fueled by austerity measures, which have broaden social inequalities and minimized institutional authority (Duncan, 2022; Sim & Tombs, 2022). Furthermore, some research relates these policies to diminished deliberative decision-making processes and authoritarian, top-down control mechanisms (Janoschka & Mota, 2021). Some scholars even consider neoliberal dynamics—often rationalized through meritocratic discourse—as systemic repertoires of social organization designed to concentrate risks horizontally, within lower social strata, while vertically aggregating benefits at higher levels, exacerbating inequality and vertical authoritarian arrangements (Ryan, 2019).

Vertical organizational management is actually regarded by some authors as a risk and crisis spillover in itself. Gawande (2010), for example, a public health policy analyst, argues that pyramidal organizational models intrinsically function as risk generators. He deploys a thorough analysis on various crisis events emerged in activity sectors where safety is of paramount significance, such as surgery, transportation, or construction. By extracting common patterns that led to catastrophic resolutions, Gawande (2010) notes that in most cases, frontline workers, from lower strata of organizational hierarchy, recognized potential hazards long before management or higher-level staff acknowledged them. He argues that pyramidal organizational structure, along with the social and cultural norms of vertical communication, fuels the buildup of unaddressed risks and careless decision-making. Gawande (2010) also points out that such social organization models foster a narcissistic culture among experts, resulting in systemic dynamics of neglecting bottom pools of knowledge, preventing employees with no decision making authority to correct faulty work processes.

The increasing criticism of neoliberal policies, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the portrayal of pyramidal organizational structures as risk and crises incubators that normalize shock responses highlight the political nature of the notions of crisis and risk. Risk can thus be classified as a vague concept characterized by poor operational quality. Paradoxes, like the

one of the bald man, most adequately illustrate the specificities of vague notions (Edgington, 2017): although the reality of baldness cannot be denied, there is no obvious standard according to witch it can be measured, such as the number of hairs that a person should loose or have in order to be considered bald. By their very nature, ambiguous situations cannot be resolved through rigid operational frameworks; rather, solutions arise from social negotiations over attributed meanings. The perceived riskiness of an action, decision, or policy is significantly influenced by the interpretations ascribed to it within a community, which is culturally conditioned to order and interpret reality according to specific value hierarchies, based on peculiar social history repertoires of past common experiences.

According to Gauthier (2018), strategic communication consultant and lecturer at Carleton University, the heterogeneity and internal contradictions characterizing crisis and risk management and communication stem from the historical evolution of strategic thought. Originating in the military domain, the earliest meaning of strategy was related to the pursuit of objectives through military superiority. The line of thought was further expanded through accounting for sports and business phenomena, as fields of strategy deployment. Gauthier (2018) notes that prominent business leaders like Jack Welch, Steve Jobs, and Lee Iacocca are often referenced in research that pinpoints strategic thinking in terms of vision clarity, planning coherence, and outcome efficiency.

The author underscores that the strategic dimension of crisis and risk communication accommodates a network of highly diverse and even contradictory representations. When influenced by military, sports, or corporate paradigms, strategic thought tends to employ a zero-sum framework, reducing strategy to a mechanism to assess winners and losers. Indeed, classical crisis models, such as that proposed by Pauchant and Mitroff (cited in Coman, 2009) place organizational needs for power and authority at the center of their interpretative frameworks. As this approach prioritizes the preservation or restoration of organizational power—primarily through cost minimization—over problem-solving, it also renders measures related to general reforms as only instrumental tactics.

Gauthier (2018), on the other hand, advocates for a paradigm shift in strategic crisis communication. He casts this field of work as a space devoted to cooperation, repair and social cohesion. The strategist's goal, in this view, is to unite social groups around common causes, address dysfunctions collaboratively, and rebuild relationships. The restoration of organizational authority thus becomes an outcome of successful reparatory processes rather than an organizing principle. In contrast, traditional frameworks make

underlying risks more likely to persist, allowing unresolved issues to re-emerge in new scenarios. If power may be preserved without deep reforms or such reforms are proven to be costly compared to other tactics that may be employed to restore organizational social influence, then they would be avoided by strategists who endorse a classical, vertical framework of crisis management and communication.

Gauthier (2018) indexes key differences that set crisis and risk strategic communication apart from other strains of strategic thought. The first of them concerns how audiences are construed. Models influenced by military, sports, or business thinking portray audiences as adversaries or competitors, whereas within crisis communication, they are to be treated as potential allies and partners. Another major distinction is related to the time horizons within which desirable outcomes are projected. In business, strategic operations typically follow quarterly cycles; in sports, planning is structured around seasons; and in the military, efforts are oriented toward specific battles culminating in the end of a war. In contrast, Gauthier (2018) emphasizes, crisis communication requires a long-term perspective, as its messages aim to build, maintain, and repair relations that have deteriorated or become antagonistic during successive critical events.

He suggests employing ecological models, advancing the metaphor of gardening as a guiding analogy. The strategic thinking of a gardener fundamentally differs from that of a soldier. Gardeners have a clear vision on functions and aesthetics a garden should encompass —whether for food production, medicinal use, aesthetic enjoyment or meditation retreat. Gauthier (2018) justifies the metaphor's relevance to crisis and risk communication by drawing on diversity: just as there are countless types of gardens, each with distinct purposes and rules of care, so too there are diverse organizations, crises, and management outcomes.

Gauthier (2018) further notes that gardeners allocate extensive time to planning and understanding ecological relationships, cultivating specific biotopes by determining which plants, insects, and animals should thrive and which must be controlled to maintain balance. This understanding of ecological dynamics mirrors the planning phase of crisis communication, which begins with analyzing the social network within which disruptive events occur. Just as gardeners track resources and tools necessary for cultivation, crisis communicators should assess available assets in relation to organizational and contextual needs. Similarly, as horticulturists account for both immediate and external environments, professionals in crisis and risk management are supposedly tasked with attending to organizational culture as well as broader social and community cultural traits.

As it may be observed, Gauthier's (2018) approach aligns with the principles of community-based project management, while Gawande's (2010) perspective embodies a structural, ideologically entrenched understanding of social and institutional design as a source of systemic risk. In contrast, the taxonomies suggested by Pauchant and Mitroff (Coman, 2009) incorporate the notion of crisis within traditional, vertically structured systems that centralize authority. Even when crises expose organizational breaches of the social contract, classical approaches frame crisis communication as a repertoire of protective actions aimed to safeguard organizational power and minimize its losses, while structural change to solve and prevent problems is regarded as secondary endeavor. It may be hypothesized, therefore, that when the main goal of crisis management is established as organizational power preservation, its offset rhetorical responses may get intimately entangled with propaganda and disinformation discursive choices. Within this framework, impression management and reputation repair rhetorical strategies (Coombs, 2009) could function as cost-efficient substitutes for systemic reform. The following section analyses the rhetorical apparatus of corporate apology from a critical cultural perspective, in order to highlight how classical rhetorical strategies exploit specific worldviews in order to preserve environments conducive to risk accumulation, turning actors who may be held responsible for crisis into crisis beneficiaries.

The repertoire of corporate apology: cultural patterns that favor acceptance of mystifying narratives

Crisis and risk communication, when conceived as discursive practice aimed at preserving and restoring the material and symbolic power of an organization facing adversity, predominantly relies on the rhetorical inventory of corporate apology. This framework, developed from the initial phases of research and practice in crisis communication, comprises four distinct strategies: differentiation, transcendence, denial, and positive reinforcement (Coombs, 2009). It is worth mentioning that these approaches are articulated around the *credibility* rather than the *veracity* of recommended narratives. Credibility reflects a subjective evaluation conferred by the receiver of a message, shaped by interpretive dynamics that mediate message processing, without necessarily implying references to factual accuracy or objective truth (Zyl et al., 2020). The subsequent section analyzes the use of rhetorical strategies derived from corporate apology apparatus, to explore how they mobilize cultural schemas in order to consolidate and reproduce power relations. It is argued that being designed

as tools of power preservation they are also highly susceptible to deploy coercive communication mechanisms, while functioning as means to constrain and prevent individual and social deliberative processes.

Rhetoric of differentiation: leveraging traditional worldviews to preserve power

The *discourse of differentiation* serves to symbolically dissociate an actor from the crisis, attributing its causes to some external, diffuse, and unfavorable context that affects the organization alongside other victimized groups. Such apologetic narratives are structured as a double message: first, organizational actions and decisions are presented as appropriate, responsible, and carried out in good faith; second, the social harm is defined as a consequence of broad, impersonal dynamics—natural, cultural, social, political, or economic, whether national or international—that lie beyond organizational control (Coombs, 2009). The crisis is therefore externalized and modeled as the result of abstract, impersonal or distant forces, not unlike physical or natural ones, while actors which may be held responsible for it are cast as co-victims within a wider field of adversity.

The use of differentiation enacts a specific worldview that conceives the social universe as a solid, stable and self-contained system, within which human relations, decisions and various repertoires of action unfold according to stable, unchangeable rules, inside a predefined reality. In such a framework, galleries of meanings are externally prescribed to individuals and greatly limited under structural constraints. To accept the assumption that extracts responsible actors from a critical situation they contributed to or, at least, that falls under their management responsibility, implies cultural sensitivity towards the paradigm of solid modernity. The notion was introduced by Bauman (2000, 2007), a canonical Polish sociologist acclaimed for distinguishing between the structural organizing patterns of solid and liquid modernity, respectively.

The so called "solid world" paradigm functions through distinct and enduring connections among various sectors of human activity, where identities and functions are pre-established, and social roles are primarily conveyed through explicit, immutable performative rules. In such a system, trust and certainty are vertically distributed— from top to bottom through institutional authority and bottom to top through tradition. Bauman (2000) propose the notion of *manufactured certainty* to describe this socially engineered sense of safety and predictability that organizes perceptions of risk and danger. Ideation of uncertainty, risk, and danger is, implicitly, conditioned by cultural definitions of certainty, safety, and security.

Manufactured certainty thus functions as a regulatory mechanism, affirming a worldview where safety is human-made by power actors and danger comes through either breaking the rules, or as a product of impersonal forces, not unlike thunderbolts and other natural phenomena.

Bauman (2000) asserts that traditional monopoly over the definition and administration of reality constricts individuals' capacity for reflection and agency. Although the domestic sphere might serve as residual locus of freedom, autonomy and personal reflection, all other domains – political, economic, social or cultural – are framed as out of the reach for common citizens. Abstracted and devoided of all contingent contents, such domains steadily remain under elites' monopoly. These cultural schemata render the surrounding world as a landscape of events that simply *happen*, preventing reflexive processes directed towards *why* they happen.

Giddens (1994) goes even further in highlighting the limited space attributed to individual reflection and agency within traditional societies. The scholar describes the corresponding cultural worldview as a system of representations centered on pervasive extraction of the personal from mainly all human domains of agency and authorship. Although private life may serve as maximal arena of personal freedom, most social arrangements such as marriage or employment, for example, occur as institutional events rather than as expressions of deliberative intent. Individuals thus perform within these frameworks, rather than creating them. Externalization, therefore, may be highlighted as the main characteristic of social dynamics built upon the model of the solid world, as individuals are conditioned to perceive the experienced reality as a horizon of events that happen to them rather than consequences of their own choices.

Within this worldview, risk is also reified as an external, naturalized condition, while defense epitomizes enclosure. Bauman (2000) emphasizes the symbolic and material centrality of the *wall* as a structuring motif of solid modernity. From public architecture to institutional design and from family organization to social norms of interaction and mechanisms of status attribution or hierarchical roles, he argues, almost the entire cultural universe is shaped and experienced on the premise of limiting both understanding and acting on the surrounding environment. Both Bauman (2000) and Giddens (1994) emphasize that for reality to be perceived as outside the reach of individuals who, none the less, experience it and subject themselves to its dominion, specific cultural conditions must be met. One of them refers to the interplay between boundaries and simplifying ideas, functioning as ordering mechanism designed to keep together a complex system while draining complexity from its parts and subsystems.

Strategic ignorance, in other terms, is required in order to preserve a cultural model that massively cluster agency and authorship on top social levels. Salter (2011) proposes the notion of *the strategic island of ignorance* to account for a large repertoire of events, information, interpretations, instruments, and courses of action that power actors classify as intolerable or inconceivable within the boundaries of an acceptable social order. These islands function as epistemic enclosures that constrain the collective imagination, preventing both transformative reflection and change making actions. By discouraging conceptual explorations that might destabilize existing hierarchies, power actors are setting the parameters within which their own actions or decisions may be questioned, thereby consolidating their control—and their monopoly—over processes of change.

Žižek (2012), for instance, criticizes the liberal conception of freedom, which divorces freedom of thought from freedom of action, as a cultural product built upon strategic ignorance. Rendering freedom of action as incompatible with social security suppresses cultural histories, experimental practices, and deliberative processes that might lead to envisioning ways to actually experience it within safe zones of both personal and social autonomy. The resulting epistemic blind spot fosters compliance with established norms, even when they generate existential discomfort. Additionally, some studies point out that ensuring strategic ignorance actually constitutes a significant, inherent part of processes related to new regime deployment or policy reforms (Mihai, 2022). Foundational rhetoric employs strategic ignorance islands to manufacture credibility and dichotomist differentiation from the old.

As mentioned above, there are specific cultural thought categories that must be enacted in order to convincingly frame crisis as an abstract phenomenon, emerging as a result of forces similar to natural ones, which overflows society and cause inevitable damage, exceeding institutional control and rendering even power actors as victims. Such a depiction could not be reconciled with a different worldview that, for example, conceives reality as open, interconnected, and co-constructed system, resulted from various strands of participation. Reductionism and binary thinking must be culturally normalized for corporate apology rhetoric drawing on differentiation to hold on. Along with Bauman (2000) and Giddens (1994), although building on different themes, towards different conclusions, Scott (2007) also argues that reductionism is not incidental but constitutive of the epistemic frameworks embedded in the traditional worldview. Oversimplifying both thought categories and the reality itself, he argues, underpins modern state formation, as well as modern institutional

consolidation. The scholar examines various systematizations that structure modernity—from measurement and quantification systems to property rights arrays, urban planning development, forestry management, sedentarization policies, and collectivization reforms. The underlying logic of all these endeavors, he concludes, is deeply utilitarian, abstract, and profoundly, if not dangerously, reductionist (Scott, 2007).

Scott (2007) illustrates, for example, how the imposition of standardized units of temporal, spatial, and weight measurement displaced localized systems of non-abstract quantification that were embedded in everyday experience, such as assessing distance by the time taken to travel from one point to another. The loss of these experiential reference systems caused the breakdown of interconnected social sequences that organized norms, rituals, and life-planning practices. Enforcing property rights, as another example, erased a large gallery of practices related to shared-used resources and along with it, all social relations that structured community life. Scott (2007), as well as other authors such as Lynd and Grubačić (2008), emphasizes that reductionist and functionalist thought function as weapons used by power actors to oversimplify reality through oversimplifying thought categories. Reductionist thought categories entail policies conducive to reality reduction, making the social environment easier to control. The resulting social model conveys social interactions established not on humane shared experiences, but on abstract grounds that obscure values and needs which used to be recognizable and communicable within previous frameworks.

According to Scott (2007), modernity systematizations reflect the intellectual legacy of Enlightenment determinism, which privileged abstract, universal modes of describing reality. Abstraction supposedly produced a gallery of sanitized conceptual objects —stripped of relational complexity— arranged in such a way as to serve utilitarian and functional hierarchies of power. Forests, for instance, came to be equated with the volume of timber deliverable to the crown; intricate systems of collective ownership disappeared under the pressure to identify taxable goods; diverse agricultural systems gave way to monocultures of durable grains, which were more easily stored and extracted by dominant actors.

Scott (2007) explains the pervasive influence of simplifying epistemic patterns through their functional efficiency in bracketing the complexity of reality. Defining reality on the basis of isolated attributes deemed useful to hierarchically superior social actors triggers a chain effect: reductionist representations justify, in turn, direct interventions that further simplify material and social environments to conform to their supra-imposed abstract labels (Scott, 2007). The vertical design of social organization, Scott (2007)

argues, emerges as a product of successive dislocations operated in the experiential fabric of the world— dislocations that produce ordered, disciplined, and mono-functional domains, optimized for control and extraction, but stripped of resilience, dissociated from the domain of the personal and lacking humanity. In later work, Scott (2012) connects functionalist simplification of reality with the production of social suffering, the perpetuation of repression, and the normalization of structural violence.

As Bauman (2000) noted before, the epistemological structure of *solid modernity* is organized around the operational question *how?*, not *why?*, allowing structural causes of risks and crises to remain invisible. The credibility of the apologetic discourse built on differentiation rhetoric thus fundamentally depends on epistemic reductions and strategic islands of ignorance. When an organization deflects responsibility for a crisis by invoking an unfavorable context while reaffirming the correctness and good faith of its own actions, it reproduces an explanatory narrative embedded in the traditional worldview. Within such a cultural architecture, crisis and risk appear as external, quasi-natural phenomena that overflow the social order. Their causes are displaced beyond the sphere of agency, while their meanings are stabilized through hyper-simplified explanatory codes. The underlying binary logic orders reality through antagonistic pairs such as *good–bad*, *us–them*, *inside–outside*, *humanity–nature*, *civilization–barbarism*, or *order–chaos* (Giddens, 1994). Such divisions bracket complexities of the surrounding environment, rendering equally simplified repertoires of threat response, conveyed within the conceptual horizon of walls, struggle, and repression. As thus, it may be argued that differentiation rhetoric not only that it may not be built on correct premises, but its persuasive force seems to be intrinsically conditioned by prevalent strategic ignorance among audiences and as such, it may be qualified as a form of coercive communication.

Exploiting complexity through transcendence rhetoric: citizens' empowerment turned against citizens

The limited epistemic reach, which may be regarded as a cultural condition derived from the previously described worldview and its corresponding social organization model, becomes a ready-made weapon to impose *transcendence-based corporate rhetoric*. This discursive strategy portrays organizational actions as wise safeguards against great but socially disregarded and misunderstood threats. Contesters, therefore, are delegitimized as ignorant or simple-minded (Coombs, 2009). Unlike approaches declined from differentiation, which mobilize a relatively stoic attitude in the face of an equally threatening world for all its inhabitants, the

appeal to transcendence builds on the grandiose allure of vision and competence, which are rendered as elites' monopoly. It assigns a moral ascendant to hierarchically superior actors, portrayed as visionaries who understand what the rest of the society is unable to grasp. These rhetoric responses depict organizational decisions and actions as complex and effective, although unpopular, in neutralizing dangers far greater than those currently experienced and commonly understood by masses, in the midst of a crisis. Audiences that challenge the legitimacy or appropriateness of unpopular measures, based on the suffering they seem to inflict, are thus marginalized as uneducated or unknowledgeable, incapable of understanding the true stakes of the complex context they are living in.

Transcendence rhetoric is, as such, especially fitted to accompany authoritarian-leaning policies and processes conducive to the institutionalization of shock responses long after a crisis wanes. The discourse that justified austerity policies during 2008 financial crisis is illustrative for such intertwining. As Janoschka and Mota (2021) emphasize, shock responses were converted into permanent simplified structures of vertical control, during a process underlined by constant rhetoric based on claims of meritocracy and competence within a complex environment. It is argued that narratives derived from transcendence rhetoric draw their persuasive force from *liquid modernity* imaginaries, as described by Bauman (2000). These narratives leverage the "black box" characteristics of the social universe, while elevating complexity to the status of a higher order principle. Consequently, complexity claims signal elevated status, alluring various social groups to engage in moral superiority contests. By adopting elites' interpretive frameworks, various audiences are conditioned to trade contingent security for an enhanced symbolic social position. Acceptance of unpopular measures, deemed as unfair or too painful by the rest of society, employs salvific sacrificial symbolism deployed to signal heightened consciousness and superior understanding. This cultural cognitive dynamic, however, mirrors mechanics rooted in the appeal to authority —a logical fallacy that deems a statement correct based on the status of the speaker (Michaud, 2018). Adopting leaders' discourse on complexity and adversity embracing reflects inflated needs of moral and cognitive superiority, even at the cost of objective wellbeing.

The imaginary of the liquid modernity, as Bauman (2000) describes it, is built on the centrality of personal power and responsibility. The conviction that life outcomes result mainly from individual choices and that reality is collectively shaped by the intricate interplay of personal decisions stays at the core of a new worldview, attributed by Giddens (1994) to de-

traditionalized societies. Both scholars ground the paradigm shift in identity politics and the politics of everyday life: when social identity is no longer culturally prescribed, domains such as gender, household arrangements, intra family roles, work relations, life course transitions, and individual responsibilities toward the socio political environment become arenas for individual and collective imagination, subordinated to personal choice (Bauman, 2000; 2007).

The transition from the solid to the liquid modernity may be understood as a movement from *manufactured certainty*—administered through culture, power, and nature—to *manufactured risk*, which is no longer seen as a feature of the natural world but as the consequence of human action. Giddens (1994) argues that manufactured risk is a historically novel cultural product that can be construed only within a worldview that describes the social environment as an interconnected, open system. Thought categories deployed by solid modernity used to organize reality into antagonistic dyads which casted danger as an outside force. *Undomesticated nature* was rendered dangerous for *humanity*; *barbarians* posed danger to *civilized states*; *they* – or the category of the *other* – were considered dangerous for *us*. Reconceiving the world as an open, interconnected system—shaped by human agency—erodes the previous ease in threat assessment. Within the previous cultural horizon, risks were simply givens of the world. The new worldview renders them as human production, an aggregate of individual unfortunate decisions which are difficult to assess, but contingent and potentially avoidable (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1994).

The apparent empowerment of the individual is reinforced through demystifying critique oriented towards structures of power, culture, and nature, which previously used to order and administer reality (Giddens, 1994). Exposed as drivers of manufactured certainty, they are now extracted from their former predefined fabric and recast as deliberative zones subjected to debate, loosing, therefore, their stabilizing force. Essentialism — the logical fallacy that attributes fundamental characteristics to beings, objects, or relations (Kurzwelly et al., 2020) — used to structure solid modernity thought. The experienced reality of liquid societies, however, is stripped of all assumed intrinsic content: each domain becomes subject to deliberation and individuals are tasked with deciding its composition, meanings, interaction repertoires, and scopes of applicability. Bauman (2000) characterizes the new socio-cognitive environment as an archipelago of self-determination, where personal decisions govern all formerly stable structures.

However, the empowerment born of demystification is countervailed by anxiety, uncertainty, and heightened awareness over the fragility of the human life — Bauman (2000, 2007) describes these phenomena as organizing life forces of liquid modernity. Giddens (1994) similarly argues that expanding the domain of personal agency also expands the geography of uncertainty, embedding a tremendous amount of anxiety within the very fabric of the social world. The scholar emphasizes that self-determination promotes the democratization of consciousness. Therefore risks are increasingly attributed to social causes, being, as such, perceived as avoidable. Notwithstanding, uncertainty and complexity derived from the interplay of micro-causes make risks – or wrong choices - difficult to assess, leading to overall increased anxiety (Giddens, 1994). De-traditionalized societies may be, therefore, especially vulnerable to cognitive glitches related to the slippery slope fallacy, which posits that if event A occurs—situated within a zone of ambiguous acceptability—then event B, which is entirely unacceptable, will inevitably follow, thus warranting the prevention of event A (Fumagalli, 2020). Shifting perceptions of risk and uncertainty broadens the imaginative horizon of possible vague, but, nonetheless catastrophic impacts.

As mentioned before, the new worldview portrays the overall reality as collective human production with distributed authorship. The surrounding environment is defined as an open interconnected system, being characterized by enhanced complexity and inflated individual responsibility derived from vague or uncertain, but potentially magnified consequences of the collectively accumulated individual errors, wrong choices and harmful behaviors. Within the web of such references, claims of innocence become untenable and the rhetoric of differentiation breaks down as non-functional. The appeal to transcendence, on the other hand, swiftly exploits these conceptual repertoires. It makes use of alleged complexity, as a pivotal argument, to state the intellectual or moral superiority of those who accept the assumption of a greater evil lurking beyond the horizon of the contingent life. It also draws on uncertainty and anxiety to inhibit deliberation on constitutive coherence of this greater danger, which although vague, opaque, or insufficiently socially understood, and, therefore, virtual, gets to be experienced as similarly or even more real than contingent, directly experienced reality. Direct pain inflicted by unpopular measures wanes, as such, in front of a virtual danger that must be kept at bay.

The anxious imaginary of liquid or de-traditionalized societies is conducive to cultural social arrangements that prioritize avoidance of virtual catastrophes, raising the thresholds of social acceptability of costs deemed necessary to manage such possibilities. The development and

implementation of counter terrorism measures broadly illustrate this dynamic. Programs like PRISM (Snowden, 2019) exemplify how diffuse, emotionally charged anxieties about unpredictable, high consequence events increase public tolerance for policies that curtail fundamental rights and freedoms in the name of security. Transcendence based rhetoric exploits cultural dispositions that discourage rigorous deliberation about internal coherence of the virtual scenarios that are supposedly avoided, their content, mechanisms, and the conditions under which certain events may occur. The cognitive and emotional environment built upon the interplay between complexity and uncertainty also inhibits exploration of alternative paths to security and, implicitly, any comparative analysis of employed solutions is therefore prevented.

The interaction between anxiety and the moral superiority attributed to actors who endorse complexity as higher order principle for understanding reality generates two reinforcing dynamics. First, it cultivates preferences for shock remedies or large scale interventions that are disruptive in the present but promise quick reassurance about the future. Second, it makes it dangerously easy to disregard and delegitimize potential victims, as first line contesters of unpopular measures are expected to be social groups who directly experience the pain, burden or difficulty imposed through the repertoires of sacrificial corrective actions. Under complexity rhetoric, they may easily be cast as relics of the past—intellectually unsophisticated, unable to grasp the "big picture," reductionist and generally ill equipped to navigate complex, interconnected environments they, nonetheless, inhabit. Complexity regimes, it may be argued, are conducive to dichotomous power distribution, aggrandizing the differences between how life is experienced at higher versus lower social levels. A worldview built around individual empowerment turns, as such, against its very founding principle.

Communication of austerity programs, for example, often deployed the rhetoric repertoire of transcendence to capitalize credibility based on audience dichotomization. Social groups who readily accepted the plethora of high costs rendered necessary to prevent national bankruptcy were portrayed as highly competent in managing complexity and intellectually superior. The others were depicted as incompetent, incapable to both understand and manage complexity of their own life. Discourse that legitimizes social protection reduction is also frequently built on the rhetoric of complexity to allocate responsibility and blame downwards, to the base line of social hierarchies. Underprivileged groups are commonly portrayed as responsible for their own predicament and presented as key contributors to systemic vulnerability or cast as obstacles to social recovery. Depriving them

of social protection may be, as such, rendered as a positive course of action, aimed to ground socioeconomic recovery on the basis of competency and meritocracy.

As mentioned before, transcendence rhetoric may be regarded as a repertoire of narratives focused on salvific collective sacrifice deployed by presumably morally and intellectually superior social groups. It is worth mentioning, though, that the notion of collective as enacted by de-traditionalized societies (Giddens, 1994) across liquid modernity (Baumann, 2000) is largely devoid of humanely experienced solidarity. Solid modernity used to prescribe social solidarity as mobilizing force directed towards accomplishment of grand common goals or projects. Contingent reality framed as collectively produced interconnected system doesn't favor classical solidarity dynamics, but disperses, personalizes and communalizes blame and responsibility across the network. Therefore, individuals socialized inside these cultural schemata display increased sensitivity to narratives that communalize risks and crises. As networked interdependence is not translatable into communal belonging, adversity and vulnerability, in turn, are not perceived as shared experiences, but as private matters located within the domain of individual choice and personal competence.

The very same lifestyle politics that both Bauman (2000) and Giddens (1994) acclaim as spillovers of citizens' empowerment readily foster arrangements that render individuals overly responsible for the general social domain, eroding, as such, the institution of solidarity and consequently exacerbating social inequality. Goldberg's (2010) study of healthy-lifestyle movements documents such a recurrent relation between self-determination rhetoric and under-provision of public services. Beliefs that attribute illness to individual irresponsibility cast health as a proof of both personal competency and personal choice — to avoid, for example, alcohol or sugar consumption, poor diets or sedentary routines. Failing to enact such healthy choices is implicitly rendered as character deficit. As such, vulnerability becomes a deeply personal condition rather than a socially mediated one. Consequently, dealing with vulnerability fades away from public policies, deepening the gaps between privileged and disadvantaged groups.

If traditional societies are criticized for essentialism in their worldviews, de-traditionalized societies enact a similar fallacy by framing individual responsibility as essentialist trait. This new worldview ignores the fact that both personal choice and personal competence are privilege dependent, and, therefore, matters subjected to the social domain. De-socializing them conveys to expanded ranges of costs allocated to common citizens as part of the new social contract. De-socializing vulnerability also

fuels the domain of righteousness, prompting social groups to prove their moral superiority on the scale of perceived life competency. Increasingly large individual contributions may thus be charged for managing collective problems. The inflated focus on the individual power and personal responsibility disrupts the old common sense assumption that contributions, responsibilities and benefits should be balanced among each other. Therefore it isn't surprising that some authors depicted policies deployed to manage 2008 financial crisis by communalizing debt as a global social engineering exercise to effectively externalize losses onto broader populations, while preserving the gains within already powerful structures, normalizing as such a great unbalance between responsibility, costs and benefits distribution (Blyth, 2013).

Over-magnified focus on self-determination is intrinsically related to diminished upward social expectations. Transcendence based rhetoric, as part of corporate apology apparatus, exploits this cultural inability to ask for or even imagine a more balanced system of power and benefits distribution. Righteousness attributions make culturally difficult for an individual to pretend support from top to bottom without compromising his sense of dignity and agency. Graeber's (2011) critique of the capitalist self is illustrative for this dynamic that turns virtual empowerment into actual vulnerability. Although the capitalist self is defined as inviolable property, identities built on this flavor of self-determination are built through the interplay of beliefs, behaviors, and competences which are rendered valuable only in so much as they allow the individual to subject himself to market forces. His life competency becomes, therefore, a measure of how easily he can extract himself from the network of personal, meaningful relationships, through emigration and relocation, to pursue a delayed reward.

Within such identity repertoires, someone is prevented to ask for top to bottom contingent reality improvements, being conditioned, instead, to subject himself to explore and conquer a virtual horizon of possibilities deployed elsewhere in space and time. The underlying narrative echoes the claims supporting virtual, vague dangers as more significant and real than harms directly experienced during a crisis. The common denominator resides in culturally conditioned willingness to downgrade contingent reality while elevating virtual constructions, in the absence of top to bottom social security frameworks. Graeber (2011) argues that leaving a constraining social space - instead of asking for and imagining better local governance - reproduces anthropological patterns that historically underlined slavery and other forms of exploitation. Accepting familial and communal dislocation to pursue opportunities elsewhere facilitates individuals' extraction from

networks where they are meaningfully recognized and treated as persons. The condition of the newcomer is arguably marked by objectification, discrimination, stereotyping and limited recognition of rights, which render someone vulnerable to exploitation, being treated more like a commodity or a means rather than a person (Graeber, 2011). The sufferings entailed by objectification and the struggle to reclaim personhood become meaningful – and acceptable –if overwritten as sacrificial trials deployed to secure some sort of future reward.

Bauman (2000) or Giddens (1994) argued that the networked world of de-traditionalized societies emerged as democratization of personal empowerment. However, the very same system breaks into a framework that normalizes and institutionalizes alienation through unbalanced responsibility attribution, in the absence of meaningful solidarity structures. Within the resulting social organization model, everyone is treated like as a stranger, performing as a commodity in the interplay of virtual objects. According to Graeber (2011), this type of dynamics enables superior actors to extract not only physical and intellectual, but also affective labor: cognitive and emotional personal development —framed as obligations under a cultural contract— structures the whole system of personhood, influencing all intimate choices.

The commodification of affective labor—unpaid emotional and relational effort expended to meet social expectations – constitutes, as Graeber (2011) argues, a central mechanism that enables the expansion and deepening of exploitative structures. Directing attention to work during personal time, worrying about an employer's problems while performing domestic chores, deliberately eliciting satisfaction or happiness in relation to professional obligations and interactions with employers, clients, or colleagues, along with a myriad of other micro- behaviors and attitudes, they all build up extensive subordination of personhood to work regimes, severely limiting someone's self-autonomy and self-authorship.

It may be argued that affective labor is far from being only an exploitative work requirement, but a political, social and cultural demand of liquid modernity or de-traditionalized societies. Both Bauman (2000) and Giddens (1994) anticipated this scenario when emphasized anxiety as a prominent corollary of self-determination. Although horizontal individual empowerment expands the domain of self-authorship, it also produces the opposite effect: individuals absorb guilt, responsibilities, obligations, and costs for maintaining or repairing the sociopolitical and economic systems they inhabit, while their vertical bargaining power over benefits, autonomy, and protection against adversity is significantly weakened. Heavily conditioned by

moral attributions, they are compelled not only to consent to a social order that doesn't feel good for them, but to elicit complex positive emotions during difficult social interactions, signaling, as such, their moral superiority.

Transcendence rhetoric deeply exploits the habitus of de-traditionalized societies. The strategy conveys moral superiority to groups culturally conditioned to be willing to communalize crises and to manage their effects through individualized practices within a networked environment. It makes instrumental use of complexity to harness social credibility and authority, while preventing consistent, structured debates related to the internal coherence of enacted measures. Uncertainty, anxiety and low social expectations are made into weapons used to erode personal power and, most disconcerting, to curate self-determination and self-authorship as expressions of contrastingly disempowering frameworks. As a strategic rhetoric response, it may thus be inferred that it falls within the gallery of coercive communication, encompassing narratives deployed on false premises aimed to convey forced social consent.

Rhetoric of positive reinforcement and denial: from externalizing crisis costs to simply rejecting them

While transcendence rhetoric renders a superior danger or evil situated beyond the grasp of critics to justify contested actions, positive-reinforcement strategies—another strand of corporate apology repertoire—portray possible sanctions directed towards a crisis responsible organization as disproportionate harm. Positive-reinforcement narratives deflect attention from the immediate crisis and reframe public discourse around the organizations' past successes and contributions (Coombs, 2009). They frequently deploy glorifying generalizations that conflate the responsible actor with an entire industry, community, institutional sector, or fundamental historical event. Common tropes include identification of such organizations with regional economic engines, key employers or funding actors, founders of defining policies, or historical defenders of various national, ethnic, or social groups (Hearit & Roberson, 2009).

The central aim of positive-reinforcement narratives is to emphasize an actor's past merits, in order to temper social hostility and, crucially, to mitigate the severity of potential sanctions (Hearit & Roberson, 2009). By identifying an actor with a broader area of public, social, cultural or economic life, these narratives build the rhetorical basis for the "too big to fail" argument (Brock, 1987). For instance, austerity policies enacted after the 2008 financial crisis were frequently justified by invoking the unacceptable social costs that a banking collapse would entail, thereby

legitimating the communalization of debt and recovery expenses (Oliveira et al., 2011).

Within the field of critical cultural studies, however, a substantial corpus of research explores the validity of the "too big to fail" assumption. Anthropological, ethnological and sociological accounts suggest that the opposite hypothesis may be valid, recoding the previous trope into "size is the problem" argument. Overemphasis on growth and scalability, it is argued, consistently exacerbates vulnerabilities and inequities built within various systems (Kuratko et al., 2020). Growth, as a higher order principle, it is shown, curbs work processes, managerial decisions and the overall functioning of a company towards exploitation, intensifying oppression, and magnifying ecological, social, and political imbalances (Fofiu, 2015; Buell, 2014).

Positive reinforcement strategies usually admit responsibility while stressing the high social costs of punitive measures, presented as either disproportionate or exceeding social capacity to deal with them. Transcendence rhetoric, on the other hand, rejects guilt, framing actions which triggered a crisis as strategically oriented towards keeping a greater danger at bay. However, both strategies support processes required for the communalization of crisis costs. Transcendence based approaches cast responsible actors as saviors, whereas positive reinforcement discourse equates the safety of significant actors with the welfare of society at large. It should be stressed out that differentiation, transcendence, and certain types of positive reinforcement rhetoric require particular cultural frameworks or specific world views, in order to enable their persuasive allure. By contrast, denial, the fourth branch of corporate apology, works transculturally. This kind of rhetoric simply denies responsibility by asserting situational purity: protagonists claim no relevant contact with actors, practices, decisions, or information that could have contributed to or anticipated the harm (Coombs, 2009). Obviously, denial is also a prevalent disinformation technique (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021).

The situational context within which corporate apology repertoire is deployed raises the stakes related to ethical boundaries that might be overlooked. Terror Management Theory research indicates that, under uncertainty, defensive and adaptive responses are oriented towards reinforcing worldviews as sources of self-security and connecting with like-minded people who share similar worldviews (McGregor & Marigold, 2003). This consolidation—taking refuge inside personal worldview, while reducing interaction with actors who share different cultural schemata — lowers the tolerance for diversity and fuels radicalization during periods of ambiguity and

socioeconomic vulnerability (McGregor, 2006; McGregor et al., 2001). Therefore, rhetoric that extensively builds upon a cultural worldview may be highly persuasive in times of uncertainty, but at great social costs: deliberative horizons are not just consistently diminished, but the process is also highly accelerated. Gauthier's (2018) distinction on different timeframes for reaching results based on strategic action becomes illuminating. Focusing on long-term perspective, as recommended for crisis resolution, would render strategies which deepen radicalization and polarization as inappropriate.

Corporate apology rhetoric, it may be argued, is adapted to short-term crisis management, triggering aggravated future social costs. Instead of enlarging deliberative social horizons in a moment of conditioned restriction, it plays on already restrictive mental behaviors in order to restrict thought deliberation even more. By doing so, it displays little sensitivity towards what could be the correct premises for proper situational understanding. Decisional freedom, as Bakir (2020) defined it, is moreover prevented then fostered by the interplay of corporate rhetoric strategies. Turning to Renn's (2009) rendition of crisis communication objectives, a sharp contrast may be observed between results secured through corporate apology rhetoric and those prescribed as legitimate. Instead of facilitating understanding of the reasoning behind decisions and public measures, these rhetoric responses seem more attuned to blur them under oversimplified and weighted cultural assumptions. Instead of assisting audiences to develop balanced perspectives based on factual data, they curb and limit the interpretative repertoire to enhance only those views which directly favor power preservation. At last, instead of supporting individual choices based on both expert knowledge and personal values, these strategies trigger the opposite effect: they limit the repertoire of choices through blinding audiences in regards of cultural values that are not conducing to popular alignment with hegemonic actors and their decisions. Given all the above observations, corporate apology rhetoric may be considered as problematic strategic communication, presenting a high structural propensity to morph into coercive communication.

Strategic discourse of image restoration and impression management: overlapping areas with disinformation techniques

From a critical-cultural perspective, the corporate apology repertoire unfolds as a closely related variant to coercive communication: it stifles deliberation, limits interpretive frameworks, and exploits threats (Bakir, 2020). The subsequent section examines the convergence between impression management and reputation repair inventories, on the one hand,

and common disinformation strategies or pseudo-argumentative discourse, based on logical fallacies, on the other hand. Coombs (2009) synthesizes the main rhetorical strategies derived from corporate apology—building on Allen and Caillouet's (1994) impression management architecture—and notes their partial convergence with Benoit's (1995) taxonomy of reputational repair. The author classifies impression-management discourse into eight narrative frames: excuse, justification, condemning the condemners, image enhancement, intimidation, denunciation, defense, and factual distortion (Coombs, 2009).

Denial as shared response of both strategic communication and disinformation approaches

The rhetorical category of excuse encompasses messages designed to diminish perceived organizational responsibility for crisis occurrence. It consists of three main types of denial: of intent, of control, and of influence. Denying intent makes the crisis seem like it happened by chance and it couldn't be predicted. Organizational conduct is portrayed as well meant and carried out in good faith. Denial of control, as a rhetoric strategy, builds on organizational limited agency, claiming there were no means or procedures that could have averted or mitigated the crisis. Denial of influence, at last, allows an organization to present itself as suffering crisis casualties along with the general population. By asserting that it neither caused nor contributed to crisis emergence, the organization frames its conduct as blameless and thus claims the moral standing and public sympathy that is typically directed towards genuine victims (Coombs, 2009). This posture attenuates social hostility and functions prophylactically, by lowering the perceived necessity or severity of presumed sanctions, along with other symbolic and material penalties.

Denial narratives exploit a familiar representation of crisis as an unforeseeable event, situated beyond human control. However, even when an actor legitimately lacks comprehensive strategic intelligence—understood, following Gauthier (2018), as the capacity to gather detailed information on internal processes, external interactions, dysfunctions, and vulnerabilities — framing a crisis as inherently unpredictable conflates with a classic disinformation technique: it ignores relevant facts, minimizes their significance, or fosters doubt about their reliability (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021).

Such discursive lines can easily incorporate fallacious claims that make use of ambiguity, employing vague situational descriptions or explanations to support convenient conclusions (Musi & Reed, 2022). They

are also compatible with generalization fallacies such as composition/ division, which assume that what is true of one part is also true of the whole (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). Narratives that convert organizational inability to forecast or control a crisis into an intrinsic situational condition display bogus reasoning: particular strategic ignorance is equaled with a general feature of organizational functioning. This kind of framing is tantalizing close to common disinformation techniques, notably presenting opinion as fact and various forms of overgeneralization. Presenting opinion as fact entails attributing evidentiary validity to subjective interpretations of reality, thereby converting belief into alleged knowledge (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021).

If an organization fails to collect significant strategic information, to properly evaluate its relevance or to act on it, this does not mean that the crisis was unpredictable or that the organization was intrinsically unable to act; instead, it highlights some of the factors that contributed to the crisis unfolding. In other words, the omission does not absolve an organization of responsibility for disruptive outcomes but supplies a partial account of how and why those outcomes occurred. When communicators sincerely believe they faced an unpredictable situation or genuinely lacked any capacity to intervene, that belief still remains an opinion. Apologetic discourse, however, converts such opinions into alleged factual description.

Overgeneralization as a disinformation tactic takes broad claims from peculiar premises and often converges with synecdoche or metonymy - presenting a partial viewpoint as representative of an entire community, or an institutional stance as the perspective held by every member of an organization (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). Denial narratives that invoke organizational inability to anticipate or manage risks systematically convert specific limitations into general descriptions: a contingent incapacity in a particular circumstance is recast as a general, invariant incapacity applicable to all actors or systems facing a similar event. Thus, particular features are presented as general properties of the situation, excusing responsibility by describing the crisis as inherently unforeseeable and uncontrollable. This mode of reasoning rests on essentialism—the fallacy that elevates certain attributes as inherently specific or woven into the „nature" of a phenomenon (Kurzwelly et al., 2020). It is worth mentioning that this kind of reasoning may easily invite circular argumentation: if unpredictability is assumed to be intrinsic to the crisis, actors are declared unable to anticipate it, which in turn is offered as evidence that the crisis is intrinsically unpredictable (Jin et al., 2022).

Claiming organizational innocence readily aligns with conventional disinformation strategies. Their persuasive impact is often amplified through the use of metaphors or loaded language, a rhetorical approach that builds evaluative judgments into lexical choices, in order to guide audiences toward pre-established interpretative frameworks (Harkova & Shigapova, 2014). Deploying the semantic fields of victimhood and innocence, an organization may blur significant distinctions of power and responsibility that set the organization apart from other victims. By doing so, however, a power actor may symbolically identify itself to those who were actually harmed. Nonetheless, this discursive architecture conflates with the flawed reasoning of false-correlation, a logical fallacy that establishes a relationship between two elements only because both are found within the same context of reference (Jin et al., 2022). Stories of innocence, as thus, may easily function as rhetorical tools to obscure responsibility and curb social judgment.

Another branch of impression management rhetoric encompasses justificatory strategies, aimed to downplay the effects, consequences, and symbolic or human costs of a crisis. These strategies include two subtypes: denial of harm and denial of victims (Coombs, 2009). Denial of harm disputes either the very occurrence of a crisis, or its severity. It is based on damage, wrongdoing, or suffering repudiation (Coombs, 2009). Associated narratives depict purported victims as unscathed or portray the event as a fabrication produced by other actors in order to enforce their own agenda, rather than a real event. This discursive framing may therefore conflate with disinformation methods that deny facts or cast them as simple opinions (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). Denial of victims, on the other hand, makes an event seem less significant and less likely to have a real effect on the general population, by treating harm as a subjective or exaggerated perception held by particular social groups. The strategy employs minimization or negation of those who claim they were harmed (Coombs, 2009). It may be argued that this tactic resembles the *gaslighting* approach, a manipulation technique used to make someone doubt their own thoughts and experiences, pushing them into questioning how they see and understand their own directly experienced reality. This leads them to believe alternative stories that serve the manipulator's interests, who gains, as such, more control over a situation (Rietdijk, 2024). Both strategies are especially vulnerable to employing straw-man distortions, to oversimplify or misrepresent claims about the impact of a crisis (Paul & Elder, 2019).

Victim-denial narratives limit the way people think about the crisis by framing harm as something that only affects certain social groups. By using the cultural trope of the "perfect victim," communicators make victims

seem responsible for their own suffering, redirecting social judgment upon them. Imperfect victims are often attributed with deficit laden, morally charged traits—laziness, negligence, bad faith, irresponsibility, indifference, intellectual incapacity, or a propensity for deceit. These attributions often appear in racialized discourses, ethnically charged speech, or political harangues that construct antagonistic dyads such as beneficiaries of social services vs. fiscal contributors or state vs. private sector, to name just a few. In doing so, they obscure structural causes of harm and organizational social responsibility to control and mitigate such factors. A crisis is, therefore, rendered as an event produced or magnified by those who are the most impacted by it.

This rhetorical line closely resembles the bogus scenario of blaming the victim and counterfeits perceptions of safeness among general audiences. Apart from the stigmatized social groups, general population is thereby positioned as having no legitimate reason for concern. A subjective safe space is thus manufactured, inside which someone can feel safe from adversity as long as they conform to cultural norms— be them political, social, economic, relational, or moral—which set them apart from victimized groups.

This rhetorical repertoire is susceptible to well-documented disinformation tactics, especially the employment of loaded language. It is also vulnerable to strategies that use ridicule, discrediting, and belittling, as well as strategies related to drowning the facts in emotions. These techniques work by making the targeted actors—people, groups, or organizations—less credible, making it harder for them to share their experiences. Diffusion of information or perspectives that might expand the inventory of alternative public opinions is, as such, disrupted (Horák et al., 2021). The so-called "invisible groups"—people excluded or ignored in policy formation, whose lived experiences are elided from collective consciousness despite sharing the same referential framework as other majority groups— may be regarded as victims of progressive weaponized discourse based on ridicule and diminishment that deepened their marginal status (De Beco, 2017). Reductive negative portrayals concentrate socio-emotional reservoirs of indignation, disapproval, anger, or repulsion toward the targeted actors, thereby enabling the strategy of drowning facts in emotion. By inflating negative affect to a point at which empirical evidence is easily disregarded, this rhetorical stand increases public receptivity to false or inadequate conclusions (Loveless, 2020).

When justificatory strategies are deployed to promote policies which further erode the status of already vulnerable social groups, who are portrayed as responsible for their own dysfunctional state, as well as for

systemic dysfunctions—these rhetoric approaches facilitate the externalization of costs away from primary crisis beneficiaries. Crisis beneficiaries comprise both social actors who benefited from an environment with unchecked risks and unaddressed problems that lead to crisis eruption, as well as those who elevate their status during a crisis, positioning themselves as saviors. Straw man distortions and appeals to emotion, as disinformation tactics (Loveless, 2020), are highly compatible with rhetoric responses focused on victim denial.

Rhetorical choices to evade responsibility and benign approaches that may turn harmful

"Condemnation of those who condemn" represents a distinct rhetorical register within impression management. It deploys comparative claims intended to show that other communities' predicament would be far more severe than the problems faced by the in-group. By relativizing harm in this way, the strategy discredits critics who emphasize the gravity of the situation—portraying them as maliciously misleading or simply ignorant actors. A related subclass, "misrepresentation of negative events," advances the thesis that the crisis is actually overstated or simply manufactured through distortion and selective interpretation by malicious actors (Coombs, 2009).

This approach closely parallels the disinformation technique known as *whataboutism*, which leverages spurious or selective comparisons to redirect public scrutiny on distinct domains that suits communicator's agenda (Bowell, 2023). Whether comparisons are exaggerated, inadequate, or occasionally adequate, they are never deployed to broaden social understanding or to prompt constructive reform to boost resilience and social security, but to generate confusion and, most significantly, to absolve an actor of due responsibility. The tactic is often coupled with ridicule and diminishment. It easily incorporates straw man constructions, emotional appeals, and anecdotal reasoning—presenting isolated cases as representative of the whole—to deflect accountability (Bowell, 2023).

Another strategic branch of impression management is factual distortion, which changes how people think about a crisis by making public information seem false, incomplete, or misunderstood (Coombs, 2009). While such assertions may occasionally uncover genuine inaccuracies, they may also devolve into denial of facts, resembling political disinformation tactics that categorize inconvenient reporting as "fake news" (Gu et al., 2017). Related approaches promoted as part of impression management apparatus include denunciation—shifting blame onto other actors for

precipitating the crisis—and intimidation—self presentation approach that magnifies an actor's capacity for coercion or retaliatory action to deter challengers (Coombs, 2009). Denunciation approximates the "crying wolf" disinformation technique, whereby an actor accuses others of comparable transgressions without acknowledging its own culpability. By doing so, public attention gets fractured and the scattered information environment breeds confusion. Initial targets of opprobrium may thus be replaced with alternative scapegoats (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021). Intimidation, by amplifying fear and helplessness, suppresses contestatory discourse and facilitates slipping into false dilemma framing, by forcing binary choices that portray attempts to hold culpable parties accountable as excessively expensive or improbable to succeed (Macagno, 2022).

When an organization can no longer avoid accountability, impression management strategies shift towards the rhetorical register of defense. By admitting fault and taking a stoic stance of acceptance, these strategies aim to lessen the public appetite for punitive measures (Coombs, 2009). Deploying defense rhetoric prompts an organization to openly accept guilt and the range of due sanctions. By positioning as such, however, an organization may retain control on its overall system. Insulating particular individuals, departments or units as guilty for the harm done allows an organization to preserve its general modus operandi and to avoid deeper, more challenging social debates regarding systemic risks and inequities which are built in its organizational design. Asking for resignations, enforcing penalties, running limited reforms and engaging in superficial restructuring operations constitute a symbolic sacrifice, signaling that justice has been served. Such sacrificial remedial gestures aim to pacify audiences while allowing the organizational ecosystem to persist with preexisting practices and institutional privileges, thereby avoiding systemic reform (Hersh, 2013). These justiciary narratives misrepresent limited remediation as substantive correction of causes, verging on the logical error of false causation (Manninen, 2018).

Image-enhancement strategies, on the other hand, use a wider range of rhetoric approaches to build reputational capital, to lower hostility, and to attenuate perceived organizational responsibility for a crisis. This discursive cluster comprises two broad techniques: laudatory self-presentation and praising-others. Laudatory self-presentation encompasses narratives that portray an organization as a role model or, at very least, socially responsible, while outward oriented discursive undertakings are focused on praising relevant communities or stakeholders to secure their goodwill, to symbolically state affiliation or belonging, and to align with common public

opinion. Both variations reframe how an organization is positioned within the cultural milieu, in order to diminish the urgency or severity of sanctions demanded by general audiences (Coombs, 2009).

Self-praising methods are meant to increase general trust in organizations engaged in crisis management. It may be argued that they work best in low to moderate vulnerability contexts. Strategic design of crisis and risk communication differentiates between particular communication processes, based on conflict intensity between stakeholders and situational complexity (Renn, 2008; 2009). When conflict potential is minimal and complexity low, information transfer approaches are recommended; their effectiveness depends on the communicator's demonstrable field knowledge and technical competence (Renn, 2009). When conflict intensity and situational complexity are moderate, communication is recommended to shift toward social dialogue. Dialogical processes demand extended time and intellectual investment. They are more difficult to control compared with unidirectional information transfer, and require plans with built in flexibility and variety. Organizational credibility in such contexts rests on demonstrated experience and competence in addressing analogous problems. In high conflict intensity, high complexity situations—where competing worldviews and systems of values collide—social dialogue alone is presumed insufficient and it's recommended to be supplemented by mediation approaches (Renn, 2009).

Self-laudatory discourse allows organizations to present themselves as either authoritative experts, leveraging technical knowledge and expertise, or as patronizing guardians, referencing frameworks of social care and social responsibility to highlight benevolent intent and capacity for partnership, protection, or community consolidation. Both positions encourage appeal-to-authority reasoning. Adopting the role-model status tacitly enables an organization to establish symbolical monopoly over crisis management approaches and procedures, inhibiting, as such, deliberative public scrutiny into crisis causes and its enabling factors that may point to alternative corrective measures. It is also worth mentioning that a substantial body of research on corporate social responsibility (CSR) documents instances when CSR initiatives conceal organizational practices that go against community standards and expectations set by the social contract (Fleming, 2012).

Praising other social actors to gain their goodwill constitutes a classic form of symbolic social integration and credibility transfer. By expressing appreciation for individuals, professional groups, or influential social actors, an organization signals shared values and symbolically affirms itself as a member of the same social family. The main goal of this strategy is to avoid

or lessen conflict with socially significant stakeholders (Coombs, 2009). A related rhetorical approach consists of narratives built upon opinion conformity, exploiting general, widely shared opinions and explanatory frameworks related to crisis unfolding. By using common beliefs, stereotypes, and cultural tropes, these narratives make an organization relatable for general audiences, who are enabled, as such, to perceive it as "one of them", an actor who speaks their language and share their values. This symbolical identification is likely leading to decreased social hostility and also diminished social vigilance (Coombs, 2009).

As a strategy to enhance trust and social acceptance, discourse based on the conformity of opinion often employs the recourse to the majority fallacy. This cognitive error yields claim credibility based on how widely it is accepted, at the social level (Chaudhary, 2022). This tactic underpins distorted thinking patterns exploited by disinformation technique known as "joining the bandwagon," which creates the illusion of a common, broadly shared interpretation of events or situations. By building massively on collective wisdom, this approach may end up enhancing interpretations, assumptions, or representations that lack factual basis (Chaudhary, 2022). More worrisome, it may further cement biased and discriminative language, naturalizing false or prejudicial social representations.

Mirroring disinformation techniques: image restoration rhetorical approaches

Established discursive strategies for image restoration, as defined by Benoit (1995), largely overlap with the rhetorical strands of impression management. They may be categorized in five distinct classes: denial, responsibility avoidance, minimization of severity, corrective action, and mortification (Coombs, 2009). Similarly, when contrasted with disinformation techniques, they transpire more as structurally consistent then mutually exclusive.

Denial, as a rhetorical strategy for reputation repair, consists of two subcategories: simple denial and denial through guilt replacement. Narratives based on these approaches typically assert either that no crisis has occurred, or that the crisis an organization has to presently manage was actually generated by others (Coombs, 2009). As previously mentioned, these types of reasoning can be easily conflated with disinformation techniques such as denying of facts, ridicule, discrediting, diminishment, as well as denunciation or "crying wolf." Moreover, they can incorporate pseudo-arguments—such as appeals to emotion, straw-man fallacies, or anecdotes— to bypass cognitive dissonance that may be experienced by interested audiences.

Within the domain of reputation restoration, the rhetorical framework employed to avoid responsibility consists of four primary discursive strategies: provocation, defense, claiming accidental causes, and expressing good intentions (Coombs, 2009). The appeal to provocation can be seen as a particular type of guilt deflection: the crisis is depicted as a result of actions that an organization was forced to deploy in reaction to irresponsible or unacceptable behavior of other social actors - parties, states, institutions, organizations, or social groups. This narrative is structurally permissive to sliding into disinformation techniques such as denunciation and *whataboutism*, being reinforced by ridicule, discrediting, and diminishment. Logical fallacies like false causality, straw man, and anecdotal reasoning may easily be embedded in such rhetorical approaches.

Defense strategies described by Benoit (1995) imply the use of excuses and denial of intent. In this case, the organization asserts that it lacked prior knowledge that would have enabled it to anticipate or prevent the crisis. The accidental-causes approach overlaps with the rhetorical strand that centers denial of control within the gallery of corporate apology. Innocence claims are made while the crisis is attributed to events situated beyond the organization's influence, suggesting that it had no capacity to control or alter the situation. Lastly, the appeal to good intentions implies developing sets of messages aimed to assure audiences that crisis managers are doing everything within their power to serve the public good (Coombs, 2009). As a communication tactic, this approach may collide with disinformation techniques which evade factual probation, such as narratives employing no evidence, weak evidence, or pseudo-evidence (Lewandowsky & van der Linden, 2021).

Displaying good intentions, as a rhetoric approach, may be supplemented by appeals to social responsibility or complemented by the repertoire of positive reinforcement—a strategic discursive strand focused on mitigating the perceived severity of a situation (Benoit, 1995). Positive reinforcement narratives portray an organization favorably, emphasizing its qualities and highlighting its past competence and good intentions, stressing out that it will continue to act responsibly during turbulent times. This framing casts the impression that the situation is still under control and risks are being handled proficiently. Other discourse strategies aimed at reducing the perception of situational gravity include minimization, differentiation, transcendence, attacking the attacker, and compensation (Coombs, 2009). The minimization discourse is a more moderate variant of denial; although the crisis is acknowledged, it is portrayed as a minor, inconsequential event that does not warrant social concern. Differentiation, in turn, corresponds to

"condemnation of those who condemn" rhetorical approach from the inventory of corporate apology techniques: it relies on comparisons with critical past events —situations involving other organizations, states, regions, or social groups—that are deemed more severe than the current crisis (Coombs, 2009). As previously noted, this strategy may be especially porous to disinformation techniques such as denial of facts or *whataboutism*, anecdotal reasoning, and appeals to emotion.

Transcendence based discourse, as a rhetorical device for image restoration, closely resembles the version comprised in the apparatus of corporate apology. The crisis is relativized and organizational credibility is bolstered based on anchoring current measures, however unpopular or restrictive, in a bright future, often conditioned by a sacrificial social dynamic (Coombs, 2009).The core message aims to convince audiences that implemented measures, however costly or painful, will elevate a community to a higher status. Political stability or economic growth are frequently depicted as dependent on the ability of specific social groups to accept and adjust to restrictive or challenging changes, presumably required for securing a better future for all. Similar narratives, however, may also be construed through deploying disinformation techniques such as the false dilemma, a manipulative reasoning pattern used to force choices that suit specific interests (Paul & Elder, 2019). Synecdoche, as another disinformation technique, may also be used to abuse collective thinking about crisis management towards similar ends, casting unpopular measures as the only acceptable way to deal with difficult circumstances. Moreover, false causality may vitiate the reasoning supporting this type of narratives, as deployed measures may not actually cause the predicted future.

Similarly, the rhetorical range of attacks against the attackers mirrors parallel approaches from impression management. Messages reflecting this strategy aim to diminish the credibility of those challenging an organization's legitimacy or actions. Critics are portrayed as mere agitators—spreading false information and distorting the public perception about the crisis (Coombs, 2009). Such presentations may be easily developed by employing disinformation techniques such as ridicule, discrediting, and diminishment, along with denial of facts. Straw-man fallacy transpire as highly aligned with such communication aims, as it helps misrepresent contesters' positions, in order to avoid real engagement in public debates about alternative claims.

Compensation, the last strategy in the set of rhetorical tactics focused on diminishing perceived severity of a crisis, employs messages emphasizing benefits and protective measures directed towards victimized groups, as a signal that the critical situation is under control, properly

managed to its wane (Coombs, 2009). Whereas prioritizing attention to victims is fundamental in crisis and risk management and communication (Renn, 2008), this approach reframes victimhood as socially tolerable, preventing substantive deliberations on systemic causes of vulnerability. If not embedded within a larger problem solving enterprise, this strategy extricates responsible organizations from the costly process of addressing systemic issues, allowing them to preserve their modus operandi. In such instances, similarly functioning narratives may be engineered by using overgeneralization, as a disinformation technique, to generate the impression that the whole problem was solved by addressing a singular, critical episode. The pseudo-argument of false causality is especially forthcoming in such discursive constructions.

The fourth core rhetorical category of image restoration strategies encompasses messages curating corrective actions. These communication products are devised to ensure audiences that the crisis management team is working to restore the pre-crisis status quo and prevent recurrence (Coombs, 2009). This is a conventional crisis response (Renn, 2009), but its credibility assessment rests on both factual probation and appropriate estimation - and communication - of situational complexity. The discursive practice is particularly vulnerable to false causality, as a pseudo-argument deployed to curb public perception of crisis resolution. Disinformation techniques such as advancing claims based on no or partial evidence may falsely relate sets of apparent corrective measures to outcomes that were never intended. Moreover, in complex situations, this response may obscure underlying systemic vulnerabilities, curtailing deeper deliberation and preventing public comprehension of systemic causes. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities' promises to restore pre-pandemic conditions were sometimes construed as highly problematic, as they neglected the entrenched socio-economic factors that underpinned the crisis (Sim & Tombs, 2022).

At last, mortification, the final rhetorical strand of image restoration approaches, closely overlaps with the strategy of defense stemmed from impression management gallery. Both rely on similar messaging frameworks that involve accepting responsibility, expressing regret, and issuing apologies (Coombs, 2009). Although this approach is considered a canonical and essential response (Renn, 2009), its implementation is contingent upon the broader set of organizational actions initiated in response to the crisis. In contexts of low complexity and limited conflict potential, mortification can serve to pacify audiences and prevent escalation of public scandals. Conversely, in high-complexity scenarios where conflicts may escalate in

scope and intensity, this strategy often results in the rapid removal of crisis responsible actors from the public view, facilitating their subsequent reorganization or rebranding within a constellation of new organizations engaged in similar practices.

The case of Cambridge Analytica is an illustrative example of mortification followed by regrouping. After the Facebook–Cambridge Analytica scandal—during which the firm was accused of conducting psychological operations aimed at influencing 2016 presidential elections in U.S.A., as well as the Brexit referendum in U.K. — the company was dissolved.

Psychological operations, typically conducted by state security agencies or state authorized entities, involve coercive use of mass communication, exploiting cultural and psychological vulnerabilities to achieve political, ideological, or military objectives (Bakir, 2020). The dissolution of Cambridge Analytica, however, turned into a network of successor organizations. Among them, researchers point to Auspex International, which influences political processes in Africa and the Middle East, or Emerdata, a political consulting firm, along with Propria, which provides data analysis. Emic, a company specialized in behavioral influence strategies for military clients in Canada and the Netherlands, was also identified as successor organization (Au, 2021).

It can thus be argued that repertoires of crisis and risk responses stemmed from impression management and reputation restoration rhetorical approaches are structurally compatible with disinformation techniques and may seamlessly incorporate pseudo-arguments. Strong structural differentiation between persuasive crisis communication and disinformation approaches would have highlighted clear boundaries, preventing fusion between domains. Cognitive tension and difficulty in coherence maintenance should have accompanied the joint between the two discursive practices if their constitutive structures were significantly different. Clearly, in specific contexts and depending on the informational and argumentative resources employed, these strategies may produce plausible representations of reality. Their structural vicinity with disinformation techniques, however, renders them as fuzzy discursive devices, prone to slide into propaganda.

General discussion and conclusions

The preceding analysis illustrates the significant heterogeneity—and occasionally the internal contradictions—embedded in current practices of crisis and risk communication. A major part of this variation may be explained by the political character of these constructs. The demarcation

between tolerable and intolerable risks, the criteria for qualifying phenomena as crisis, along with standards and frameworks informing appropriate responses to adversity, they are all heavily modeled by cultural paradigms governing the social context within which a series of disruptive events unfolds.

However, cultural world views, as it was previously highlighted, may be turned into cognitive weapons, deliberately activated and used to exploit collective thinking into supporting biased social, political or cultural representations, which allow power preservation at the cost of social problem solving. Epistemic opacity and strategic ignorance, it was argued, constitute structural mechanisms deployed to curtail deliberative processes within a community facing adversity. The emergence of a crisis may virtually make recognizable various sets of biased social representations and social practices, deficiencies in the social contract, blind spots or inadequacies in general modus operandi of some organizations and faulted relation patterns between stakeholders, which, left unattended, culminated into catastrophic outcomes. But post-traumatic learning and growth, along with the change a crisis may convey, are consistently diminished when communication is strategized as a tool for power preservation, instead of being used as a problem solving process.

Moreover, different approaches in operationalizing strategic thinking reflect significant variations rooted in the underlying cultural representations informing how outcomes are defined and how they should be secured. Whether adopting a competitive or cooperative stance, framing critical events as zero-sum confrontations or collective endeavors, along with prioritizing short-, medium-, or long-term outcomes, all these choices profoundly shape decision-making processes. Additionally, orientation toward power preservation versus problem solving, as stated before—among other factors—critically influence response strategies, vulnerability management methodologies, and communication structures.

Although most scholars distinguish crisis and risk communication from purely persuasive strategies and propaganda, the rhetoric of corporate apology and image restoration show intimate filiation with disinformation techniques. It may be argued that such entanglement derives from their close alignment with aims and objectives related to power preservation which are built into their design. Applying critical cultural analysis on corporate apology narratives highlights dynamics which exploit cultural schemata to inhibit deliberation and constrict the spectrum of interpretative options. Pluralistic, alternative perspectives that don't suit power actors' interests are curtailed in order to build social consensus, based on more than often

questionable premises. It may, as thus, be argued that classic rhetorical devices for crisis communication may easily convert into coercive communication tools, rather than supporting individual choices, based on field knowledge and personal values, or assisting audiences into balanced situational understanding, based on factual data. It, thus, remains questionable whether these strategies can be fully disentangled from their original, power-consolidating design. Drawing the line between power oriented objectives and problem solving aims transpire as highly significant for predicting how crisis communication strategies will play out and to what ends.

Furthermore, as highlighted in the fourth section, impression management and image restoration strategies exhibit significant structural similarities with common disinformation tactics. Their structural propensity to seamlessly incorporate pseudo-arguments—such as false causality, straw-man fallacies, or emotional appeals—raises concerns regarding sufficient differentiation between these rhetorical repertoires and manipulative approaches. Although appeal to ethical frameworks is generally promoted as a differentiator, their design and inner structures prove to be insufficiently fit to ensure the integrity of public deliberation. Future research endeavors should undertake a comprehensive examination to contrast rhetorical strategies that structure risk and crisis communication with coercive communication techniques across different contexts. Additionally, it may be stringent to broaden the conceptual imaginary of rhetorical crisis responses, in order to decisively disentangle these practices from propaganda. A first step might be to overwrite the vernacular of guilt and culpability with lexical choices related to vulnerability, responsibility and problem solving, as exploring pathways to constructive resolution demands a relative freedom to think and to act beyond mere defense necessities.

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