After the Storm: A Case Study of Tuscaloosa, Alabama's Communication Response to the

April 27, 2011 Tornado

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i

ABSTRACT

ENELDA BUTLER: After the Storm: A Case Study of Tuscaloosa, Alabama's Communication
Response to the April 27, 2011 Tornado
(Under the Direction of Lois Boynton, Ph.D.)

On April 27, 2011, an EF-4 tornado struck Tuscaloosa, Alabama, resulting in 52

fatalities, more than 1,200 injuries, and the destruction of 12 percent of the city. This study

examines Tuscaloosa's communication response to the tornado, specifically how the local media

covered the communication strategies that the city used in response to this crisis. This study will

also investigate how the local government disseminated information in the aftermath of this

disaster, especially the types of tactics the government used to communicate with the public

during this time. This information will provide an account of the city's communication

environment in the aftermath of the storm.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.   Introduction

Natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, and floods can be difficult situations to respond to because of their unpredictable nature. These events can be devastating to communities regardless of whether the government and its citizens are prepared for them or not. For example, a string of tornadoes that occurred in the United States during the last week of April 2011 killed more than 200 people and caused millions of dollars in damage.

The city of Tuscaloosa, Ala. especially sustained massive damage. Tuscaloosa is a city with a population of more than 90,000 located in West Alabama ("Facts," n.d.). It is the county seat of Tuscaloosa County, and fifth largest city in the state. It's also home to the largest university in the state, the flagship campus of the University of Alabama, which currently enrolls more than 30,000 students. Another of the city's major landmarks is a Mercedes-Benz manufacturing plant located on the outskirts of the town, which was the company's first plant built in North America.

On April 27, 2011, an EF-4 tornado struck the city, resulting in 52 fatalities, more than 1,200 injuries, and the destruction of 12 percent of the town ("Welcome to Tuscaloosa Forward," 2011). More than 600 businesses in the city were damaged and more than 4,000 private residences were damaged or destroyed. Several pieces of government property were also greatly damaged, including a fire station, police precinct, communication tower, and facility that housed the city's Emergency Management Agency and Environmental Services department. Because of this damage, nearly 7,000 people became unemployed (Lynch, 2011).

The purpose of this thesis is to examine Tuscaloosa's communication response to the tornado, specifically how the media covered the communication strategies that the city used in response to this crisis. This study will explore how the local government disseminated information in the aftermath of this disaster, including the types of tactics the government used to communicate with the public in a time when many residents were without electricity. This study will serve as an example of the intersection of crisis communication and government public relations.

II.   Literature Review

This study requires a review of scholarly literature in the fields of crisis communication and government public relations. The literature review aims to discuss best practices for public relations in crisis situations, particularly in the government sector. Because the focus of this case study is a natural disaster, research on past government communication responses to natural disasters will be especially relevant. Another field that will be discussed is the use of new media technology (namely social media) in communicating about crises.

Crisis Communication

There is no universal definition for crisis. In *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, Timothy Coombs (2011) compiled a list of several crisis definitions and uses them for the basis of his own definition of the term, which is "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectancies of stakeholders and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (p.19). Coombs suggested that a crisis is influenced by how stakeholders view the event because these group's perceptions of the situation help create the meaning of the crisis. He also suggested that the term crisis should only be used to describe "serious events that require careful attention from management," which is what separates crises from incidents (p. 19). The phrase "negative outcomes" refers to the amount or type of harm that the crisis caused stakeholders financially, physically, or psychologically. This definition also stresses the unusual nature of crises because these events are unpredictable but should be expected by organizations.

Coombs (2011) also developed definitions for crisis management and crisis communication. Crisis management refers to "a set of factors designed to combat crises and to

lessen the actual damages inflicted" (p. 20). Crisis management also aims to reduce the negative

outcomes of a crisis and protect the organization and its stakeholders from damage. Crisis

communication is described as "the collection, processing, and dissemination of information

required to address a crisis situation" (p. 20). Crisis communication is often divided into three

phrases of organizational response to a crisis event. The first stage of crisis communication is

pre-crisis, which focuses on compiling information about potential risks and providing training

for members of the organizations in managing potential crisis situations. The second stage is

when the crisis actually occurs and relevant information is processed so that the organization's

crisis team can begin deciding how to disseminate messages about the crisis to outside

stakeholders. Coombs suggested that crisis messages are more successful in this phase if they are

accurate, consistent, and delivered quickly. The third stage is the post-crisis phase in which the

organization evaluates its crisis management efforts and provides additional crisis messages, if

needed.

Crises are often complex and can develop from a variety of situations like natural

disasters, terrorist attacks, unethical business practices, technological problems, etc. Scholars Liu

and Levenshus (2011) stated that most crises share the following five common characteristics:

"(1) they involve the destruction of property, injury, loss of life, and reputational damage; (2)

adversely affect a large number of people; (3) have identifiable beginnings and endings; (4) are

relatively sudden; and (5) receive extensive media coverage and public attention" (p.102). They

suggested that these characteristics can assist government officials in determining whether an

incident has become a crisis and when a crisis plan should be implemented. Crisis management

is especially important for government communicators because of increased level of media and

public scrutiny of these organizations during crisis situations. Understanding the nature of a crisis can help all communicators effectively respond to these incidents.

In order to effectively respond to a crisis, communicators should first determine which type of crisis best describes the situation. There are several different types of crises, and most government crises can be identified as either systemic, adversarial, or image/reputation crises (Liu & Levenshus, 2011). Systemic crises affect the overall operations of an organization. These crises are generally difficult to predict because they tend to occur outside of the control of the organization. A natural disaster could be classified as a systemic crisis. Adversarial crises deal with opposition to the organization by an external group. These incidents often occur when an outside group attacks some aspect of the organization. Image/reputation crises are referred to as crises of public perception. In these situations, the credibility or ethics of the organization are questioned by the public. Liu and Levenshus suggested that being aware of different types of crises can help government communicators better prepare for and potentially avoid these situations.

In *Ongoing Crisis Communication*, Coombs (2007a) emphasized the importance of crisis management and offers guidance for how organizations can prepare for, respond to, and recover from crises. He highlighted how crucial an organization's response to the crisis is in effectively handling the situation. Coombs developed a set of crisis response strategies for organizations to utilize in his situational crisis communication theory, which suggests that some public relations problems can be best solved through the use of specific crisis response strategies (2007b). These strategies fall into the following categories: deny, diminish, rebuild, and reinforce (2007a). The deny category is appropriate when addressing rumors and it includes these strategies: attack the accuser, denial, ignore, and scapegoat. Coombs suggested that the diminish category can be used

in accidental crises in which there is no crisis history and in crises with victims if there is a prior crisis history. This category includes excusing, justification, and separation. The rebuilding category is often used in preventable crises. This category includes apology, compensation, corrective action, and transcendence. The reinforce category can be used to improve the organization's reputation after the crisis. These strategies are endorsement, ingratiation, reminding, and victimage. However, Coombs advised that reinforce strategies should only be used in conjunction with strategies from another category.

Prior to Coombs, Benoit (1997) developed similar strategies that can be beneficial in crisis response situations. His image restoration theory addresses ways that organizations can repair their public images. More specifically, an organization can use these strategies when faced with an attack to its image, in which the organization is held responsible for an action that is considered offensive. Benoit claimed that it does not matter if the action is actually offensive, but rather whether the action is perceived as offensive by the audience. These image repair strategies fall into five categories: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification. Several image repair strategies compose each of these categories. Denial refers to the organization rejecting the claims made against it. Evasion of responsibility involves shifting the blame for the action to another organization, or claiming that the event was merely an accident. Reducing offensiveness is minimizing the severity of the action. Corrective action is when the organization promises to fix the problem. And finally, mortification refers to the organization offering a full apology to those affected by the event. Benoit suggested that this theory can be applied by various organizations like businesses, nonprofits, and government agencies because image is still an essential aspect of each of these types of groups.

The discourse of renewal also relates to image restoration theory, especially during crisis recovery efforts. According to Ulmer et al. (2006), renewal focuses on "the provisional responses of organizational leaders to devastating disasters, such as fires and floods, and the leaders' natural impulse to rebuild and move beyond the crisis" (p.131). This type of discourse allows the organization to rebuild itself and capitalize on opportunities after the crisis. Ulmer et al. developed four characteristics of renewal discourse. The first characteristic is that renewal discourse should be provisional instead of strategic, meaning that the communication is a "natural and immediate response to the event" rather than a response "designed to achieve some strategic outcome" (p.134). The second trait is that renewal discourse should be prospective rather than retrospective, or that the response should include messages focused on the future of the organization instead of its past. The third characteristic is that the organization should highlight the positive outcomes of the crisis by discovering the opportunities the event created, and not merely focus on the negative effects. The fourth trait is that renewal is a leader-based form of communication, meaning that the leader of the organization can have an instrumental impact on crisis recovery through the use of renewal discourse.

In addition to these characteristics, Ulmer et al. (2006) suggested that certain conditions must be present for renewal discourse to be effective. The effectiveness of the discourse is dependent upon crisis type, stakeholder relationships, corrective action and change, and whether the organization is public or private. The optimal condition for renewal discourse would be a crisis that requires physical rebuilding, in which the organization has a positive relationship with stakeholders prior to the event and is committed to corrective action and change after the incident. Additionally, the authors hypothesize that privately held companies may have an easier time than publicly held organizations in effectively utilizing renewal discourse. Ulmer et al.

suggested that renewal is especially relevant in the aftermath of natural disasters. Coombs (2010) also suggested that renewal discourse is often used in first-person case studies of crises in which researchers speak with members of organizations that handled the communication process during the crisis.

For the crisis presented in this case study, Coombs' (2007a) crisis response strategies will likely be most relevant. Strategies from the diminish category may have been utilized in this situation because of the unpredictable nature of this crisis. The rebuilding category may have also been utilized to emphasize the city's recovery efforts in the aftermath of the storm. Similarly, Ulmer's discourse of renewal would be helpful in crisis response to natural disasters.

The Role of Social Media in Crisis Communication

A growing trend in crisis communication is the use of social media, such as blogs and social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter. The use of these types of websites has reached all-time highs around the world in recent years. This trend led to the creation of the social-mediated crisis communication model, a framework developed to "explain how the source and form of crisis information affect organizations' response options and recommended social-mediated crisis response strategies" (Liu et al., 2011, p.346). The model examines the interaction between the organization that is the source of the information, and three different publics: influential social media creators, social media followers, and social media inactives. Influential social media creators develop crisis information for others to consume, social media followers consume that information, and social media inactives consume the information through offline communication with someone who consumed the information through social media. In this model there are two types of sources of crisis information: from the organization and from a

third-party unaffiliated with the organization. The study included third parties as sources because it is likely in many situations that these parties share information from an organization with others who may have not received the information directly from the organization. The model also developed five factors that impact how an organization communicates in a crisis situation: crisis origin, crisis type, message strategy, message form, and infrastructure. Liu et al. (2011) claimed that this model can help communicators better understand "how the organization can best position itself as the preferred source for crisis information [and] crisis managers need to understand how crisis information form and source affect publics' levels of acceptance of different organizational crisis response strategies" (p.346). A clearer understanding of how these factors function in social media helps organizations communicate more effectively in this medium.

Veil et al. (2011) also offered suggestions for how organizations can utilize social media in their crisis communication efforts. Most importantly, the authors suggested that communicators value the importance of social media by incorporating this tactic into emergency management plans. They also recommended using social media in environmental scanning as a way to identify potential risks or crises. Communicators should use social media before crises occur to start a conversation with its publics by following and sharing messages with credible sources. Organizations can also utilize social media for reputation management and rumor control by responding honestly to questions or criticisms in this medium. Social media should be used to provide updates and become a part of the organization's daily communication activities. As the popularity of social media continues to grow, more organizations need to begin to utilize this platform to effectively communicate with their publics.

Social media can be a beneficial communication tool in crisis situations. It allows organizations to communicate quickly with their publics and continuously update throughout the crisis (Veil et al., 2011). It also enables organizations to communicate directly with their publics and create an open dialogue with them. However, there are some restrictions to social media usage. For instance, these websites can only be accessed when and where Internet or cell phone service is available. Therefore, in some situations, like natural disasters, in which people do not have electricity, these tactics may not be able to be utilized. Social media should also be used to supplement other forms of communication, not replace them. These tactics should not be the only form of communication that an organization provides because it is likely that some members of its audience do not use social media and will not receive the message.

Government Public Relations

Contrary to Benoit, Avery and Lariscy (2010) suggested that government agencies are unique organizations, and because of this, their management of crises differs from other groups. They stated that two factors contribute to the special relationships between government agencies and their publics: (1) "government agencies' products are the reputations they acquire through public service and (2) the nature of publics of government agencies in crisis communication is unique… [because] publics…cannot volitionally choose to use or not use the services of government agencies" (p.330). Publics essentially have no choice but to interact with government agencies; therefore, government communication must take the nature of this relationship into account. This unique position of government entities supports the creation of models for these organizations to manage crisis situations.

Liu and Horsley (2007) also examined the various and unique factors that can affect government communication like politics, legal constraints, and extreme media and public scrutiny. This climate inspired them to develop a public relations model specifically for government communicators: the government communication decision wheel. According to this model there are four microenvironments that government communication occurs within: multilevel, when two or more levels of government work together on a single problem; intergovernmental, when two or more organizations at the same governmental level work together; intragovernmental, when only one government entity handles a situation; and external, when government agencies work with a private or nonprofit organization. The model also offers eight characteristics that affect government communication and proposes how these characteristics operate in the aforementioned microenvironments. One proposition that may be relevant to this case study is that government officials often do not realize the importance of public relations in routine situations. In these times, the multilevel microenvironment places the most importance on public relations. However, in nonroutine or crisis times, more emphasis is placed on communication in all four microenvironments.

Horsley (2010) also recently developed another model for government public relations officials: the crisis-adaptive public information model, which assists government communicators in crisis situations. Horsley created the model after observing a group of public information officers at a state emergency management organization during routine operations as well as during crisis training. The crisis-adaptive public information model showcases "the flow of public relations activities as the situation progresses from routine to crisis" (p.564). In routine mode, public information officers perform regular public relations tasks. During this time, public information officers should also utilize issues management to become aware of and prepare for

potential crises. When a crisis arises, the public relations practitioners enter disaster mode by stopping their normal public relations activities and beginning crisis communication activities. In this phase, the structure of the organization changes into a joint information center in which the local and state public information officials work together to address the crisis. When the crisis is over, the joint information center structure ends with the public affairs office returning to its routine structure.

The United States government has also developed a guideline for how government entities should respond to crises. In *Flirting with Disaster: Public Management in Crisis Situations*, Schneider (1995) detailed the structure of the intergovernmental response system to natural disasters. The response is characterized as a "bottom up" process because it begins at the local level. Municipal and county governments should be the first groups to respond to the crisis situations that occur in their jurisdictions. If possible, the local level of government should attempt to manage the situation without assistance from any higher levels of government. However, local governments can become overwhelmed by the magnitude of disasters and may be unable to adequately respond. When this occurs, the state government (which includes the governor, state emergency preparedness division, and state agencies) becomes involved with the relief efforts. Each state has its own disaster response plan that it adheres to in these circumstances. If the situation requires additional response, the state may ask the federal government for assistance. In fact, the federal government cannot become involved in the crisis response until the state government makes a formal request for help. Schneider suggested that natural disasters are often best handled at the local level because local officials are most familiar with the geographic area and the needs of the residents. However, if all levels of government are involved, no one level should dominate the crisis response efforts.

Although there is an official framework for government crisis response, it is not always followed in these situations. Schneider (1995) offered several reasons why government crisis response does not operate as outlined in the framework. First, the different levels of government may view the crisis from different perspectives, making it difficult for these entities to present a united response to the situation. Second, crisis response officials may not be able to control the efforts of other members of the response team. For instance, these officials often do not have the power to force members of other government agencies to complete their assigned tasks. Third, disaster-relief efforts often lack sufficient funding at all levels of government. Schneider suggested that this underfunding affects local governments more than other levels, because many of their employees tend to only be part-time personnel. These problems, along with many other difficulties, affect government crisis responses and hinder emergency management officials from following the recommended framework.

Much research has been conducted in the field of crisis communication. However, a majority of this research concerns crises that occurred in the private sector. In comparison, there is far less research of crisis management in the government sector (Avery & Lariscy, 2010). Recently, this field has begun to grow. For instance, the crisis-adaptive public information model addresses the intersection of government public relations and crisis communication (Horsley, 2010). This field should be explored further because of the unique nature of government agencies as well as the large impact that they have on their publics. This study contributes to this burgeoning section of literature about government crisis communication.

III.   Research Questions and Method

This study aims to answer the following two research questions:

> **RQ1:** What were Tuscaloosa's communication tactics after the April 27, 2011
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> tornado?
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> **RQ2:** What crisis response strategies did Tuscaloosa communicate through the media
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> in the aftermath of the tornado?

To answer these questions, a content analysis was conducted to examine the city of Tuscaloosa's communication environment in the aftermath of the tornado. Additionally, an in-depth interview was conducted with the public relations coordinator of Tuscaloosa Incident Command to provide context of the city's communication environment after the storm.

A qualitative interview was used to answer RQ1. The in-person interview was conducted with the public relations coordinator of Tuscaloosa Incident Command Center, which is the city's department dedicated to response and recovery after the April 27 tornado. The employee was asked about the city's communications response. The interview subject was also asked questions about the communication tactics that the city utilized during the aftermath of the tornado, especially which media channels were used to disseminate information during this time. Several interview questions focused on the city's usage of social media in its communication after the storm.

The interview was tape recorded and then transcribed using word-processing software. The transcript was read and observations were made about the content. Passages of the interviews that were particularly relevant to answering the research questions were identified. This information was used within to provide a more complete account of Tuscaloosa's

14

communication climate after the storm. The interview allowed one of the city's communicators

to describe her actions during time, as well as the motivations for and the perceived effectiveness

of her work. Information collected from the interview was also compared to the data gathered

from the content analysis to determine whether the messages and crisis response strategies

utilized by the communicators were salient in the city's media coverage.

In order to answer RQ2, a content analysis was conducted of media coverage of the

tornado in the city's newspaper: *The Tuscaloosa News*. This newspaper was selected because it

is the only daily newspaper in Tuscaloosa, and provided an example of media coverage of the

tornado response at the local level. The analysis only included news articles in the paper from

April 27, 2011 until September 7, 2011. This timeframe spans from the day that the tornado

occurred until the day after the city approved "Tuscaloosa Forward," its strategic community

plan to renew and rebuild the city. The creation of this plan can symbolize the transition from the

crisis response phase to the crisis recovery phase. The news articles were collected through a

search on the *Tuscaloosa News* website using the term "April 27 tornado." Additionally, the

source of information in the articles was taken into account. Only articles that include quotations

from Tuscaloosa city employees and elected officials during the aforementioned timeframe were

included in this study. Analyzing quotations from city employees and officials was a way to

examine which crisis response strategies were used by the city during this time period. This

method also showcased which crisis response strategies were used more frequently as well as

which strategies were more salient in the city's media coverage.

The crisis response strategies that were coded are taken from a list compiled by Liu and

Levenshus (2011) based on Coombs' crisis response strategies. There are four categories of

response strategies: deny, diminish, rebuild, and reinforce. The deny category includes the

following strategies: attack the accuser, denial, ignore, and scapegoat. The diminish category is comprised of excusing, justification, and separation. The rebuilding category includes apology, compensation, corrective action, and transcendence. The strategies in the reinforce category are endorsement, ingratiation, reminding, and victimage. In total, 15 different crisis response strategies were included in this study, and the analysis was self-coded.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. For instance, the content analysis only includes articles from one newspaper. Because of this, the study is limited to local media coverage of Tuscaloosa's tornado response, although the city also received statewide and national media coverage in the aftermath of the storm. Also, the Tuscaloosa Incident Command Center was the only organization examined in this study, because its primary purpose is the tornado response. Numerous other departments, such as the Tuscaloosa Police Department, Fire and Rescue, and Emergency Management Agency, were involved in the response and recovery; however, the tornado response was not their sole responsibility. Another limitation is the size of the communications portion of the Tuscaloosa Incident Command Center. There is only one fulltime employee in the group who manages the center's communications efforts. Other employees who also assist in communications tasks were sent interview requests, but they did not respond to participate in this study.

IV. Findings

An in-person interview was conducted with Meredith Lynch, the public relations coordinator of Tuscaloosa Incident Command. The interview took place at the Incident Command Center, which is located in the basement of Tuscaloosa City Hall. The interview lasted for nearly one hour and was tape recorded. The audio file of the interview was then transcribed. An interview request was also sent to a co-commander of Incident Command, but a response was not received.

During the interview the public relations coordinator answered approximately 12 questions about Tuscaloosa Incident Command and the role that communications plays in the organization (See Appendix B for list of questions). In 2009, 60 city employees participated in FEMA's Community Specific Incident Management Training to prepare to handle crisis situations (Lynch, 2011). The idea for Tuscaloosa Incident Command came from this training session. Lynch said that the organization was called to action by the mayor immediately after the tornado occurred. The center includes representatives from various city departments as a way to improve collaboration and communication between them, so that they are all "on the same page." Members of the command center held jobs in various city departments including Fire and Rescue, as well as the City Attorney's and Mayor's offices. When the command center is shut down, these employees will return to their former positions.

Tuscaloosa used several tactics to disseminate information to its various publics after the storm. According to Lynch (2011), the city's communications goal was to "take advantage of the spotlight and use the attention to emphasize the importance of finding and using available resources to recover and rebuild Tuscaloosa." She assumed her role at Tuscaloosa Incident

17

Command in August 2011. She described Incident Command as "a central location where information from all the different departments goes through before going to the mayor, and then the media" (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012). Prior to this time, she worked in the mayor's office, which managed most of the city's communication before the storm. Lynch served as an intern in the mayor's office while she was also a master's student in public relations at The University of Alabama. She detailed:

> At the time of the tornado I was in the mayor's office as an intern... As time went on, I stayed involved with the tornado recovery, but we also still had to do functions for the mayor aside from the tornado. So they decided to create a position just for me to handle all the public relations that was directly related to the tornado. We still get calls every day about tornado recovery…so we still have an ongoing need for communication and media just for the tornado (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012).

In both her roles as an intern in the mayor's office and Tuscaloosa Incident Command's public relations coordinator, she said she completed the following tasks: scheduled media interviews with as many media outlets as possible; answered phone calls from citizens, donors, volunteers, government officials, etc.; relayed information from Incident Command briefings to answer media and public inquiries; scheduled press conferences, Incident Command meetings, and interviews to keep the public informed; and constantly updated city of Tuscaloosa social media sites.

Social media usage was one the city's major communication tactics after the tornado. The number of Twitter followers and tweets both greatly increased in the days after the storm. The day before the tornado, the city had 1,200 Twitter followers and as of March 2012, the Twitter

page had 7,604 followers. The first tweet about the tornado actually occurred on the day before the tornado struck because city employees were aware that there was a chance of severe weather the following day. This tweet said: "Mayor Maddox is monitoring weather forecasts for our area & Incident Command is on standby should severe weather occur" (Lynch, 2011). Before the storm, the city's official Twitter page published about five tweets a day. On April 27, 2011, the city posted 47 tweets, and on April 28, 2011 it published 48 tweets, which was the highest number ever in a single day (Lynch, 2011). One month later the city averaged about 16 tweets a day. As of 2012, the city publishes between 5-10 tweets each day.

According to Lynch, the city used social media to "make sure that people were prepared as much as possible before the storm, and to keep them as informed as possible after the storm" (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012). Common information found in the official city tweets were: injuries, fatalities, power outages, road closures, donations, shelters, volunteers, water outages, school schedules, and ordinances. City employees used the Twitter page to mainly disseminate information to the general public and also to the media and other important stakeholders. For instance, the city developed a partnership with Lamar Advertising, a company that owns billboards in the area. Lynch explained:

> Every time we'd use the hashtag "TUS" [an abbreviation for Tuscaloosa] the tweet would automatically go to the electronic billboards that were functioning in the city. So that if your phone was dead or you were driving or walking somewhere, you could look up at the billboard and see, for example, that there was food, water and shelter at the Leland aid station (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012).

As for Facebook, the city has an active profile and a fan page. The city has nearly reached the website's limit of 5,000 friends on its profile page, and currently has more than 1,000 unanswered friend requests (Lynch, 2011). Before the storm, the city had less than 100 likes on its Facebook fan page, and as of March 2012, the city's fan page had 5,100 likes. The city used the Facebook pages to communicate with residents and respond to their questions and concerns. Facebook was also used to keep publics informed about the extent of the damage and the recovery process. For instance, Lynch said:

> The day after the storm, the mayor went up in a helicopter and surveyed the destruction. As soon as he got back we posted those photos to Facebook, letting people know that we needed help. We continued to post pictures of what was going on and made sure we utilized social media to let people know what was happening in our city (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012).

Also, in the hours after the storm, she checked the city's Facebook account to see if anyone from the mayor's office had posted an update on the situation. "The first thing I did was get on Facebook to see if my boss [in the mayor's office] had posted something. Since no one had power you couldn't turn on the TV to see what was going on, so we really had to utilize Facebook and Twitter after the storm" (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012).

Another way that Tuscaloosa disseminated information was through official press releases. The city produced 12 tornado-related press releases in the months following the storm (Lynch, 2011). The majority of these releases came from the mayor's office. The releases provided important facts about various subjects like the immediate impact of the tornado, a city-wide curfew, a boil water notice, the creation of a disaster relief fund, and the suspension of

curbside recycling services. Currently, all press releases related to the tornado are produced by

Tuscaloosa Incident Command. According to Lynch, "Whenever we have information come out

related to the tornado we'll send out a press release, if it requires one. There are some things that

just need Twitter and Facebook posts" (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012).

An additional communication tactic utilized by Tuscaloosa after the storm was press

conferences. The mayor gave two press conferences each day, one in the morning and one in the

evening. Lynch explained, "Right after the tornado we would have incident command meetings

three times a day. The briefings were just internally, talking to the mayor and staff about the

number of fatalities and injuries, and he would report that information at the press conferences"

(M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012). Information from the press conferences

was also disseminated in other ways. Full videos of the press conferences were available to be

viewed online in the *Tuscaloosa News* website. Radio stations also played the press conferences

live on the air. The city also shared this information through social media. Lynch stated, "Every

time we had a press conference we also had a long list of facts that he was about to release, like

road closings or shelter locations, we would tweet them and put them on Facebook" (M. Lynch,

personal communication, February 6, 2012). She believes that disseminating information through

various avenues likely increased the audience for the information.

The public relations coordinator also explained the role that Tuscaloosa Incident

Command played in the creation of "Tuscaloosa Forward: A Strategic Community Plan to

Rebuild and Renew," the city's multi-year plan to rebuild the city. According to the plan's

website (www.tuscaloosaforward.com) its goal is to demonstrate that "through smart decision-

making and careful planning Tuscaloosa can become a better and stronger city. The plan

establishes a framework that city government, the private sector, and the public can work from to

achieve a common vision" ("Welcome to Tuscaloosa Forward," 2011). The name of the plan

alone embodies these sentiments. Lynch explained the inspiration for the plan:

> Right after the storm Mayor Maddox wanted to make it clear that we weren't going to
>
> rebuild the exact same way that we were going to rebuild better. We knew that so much
>
> tragedy had happened but this was going to be an opportunity for the city to become
>
> better that it was before the storm (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6,
>
> 2012).

The city wanted the plan to be citizen-driven and to include input from numerous residents. The

plan's website allowed residents the opportunity to voice their opinions and ideas about the

rebuilding process. Also, several public meetings were held during the creation process of the

plan in which more than 1,300 residents attended. On September 6, 2011, the Tuscaloosa

Forward plan was passed by the city council (Lynch, 2011). This plan will likely remain a key

aspect of the city's communication efforts in the coming years.

Content Analysis

To collect the sample of articles that would be used in this study, a search of the term

"April 27 tornado" was conducted on the *Tuscaloosa News* website. This search yielded 225

articles between the dates April 27, 2011 and September 7, 2011. These articles were then read

to determine whether a Tuscaloosa city employee or elected official was quoted, or if an

employee was identified as a source of information. Articles that quoted Tuscaloosa County

employees or officials were excluded, as well as state employees and members of federal

agencies, like the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Articles that originally appeared in

other newspapers and were reprinted in the *Tuscaloosa News* were omitted, along with articles

provided by wire services, like the *Associated Press*. After this process, a total of 63 articles were found to meet these criteria (See Appendix A for list of articles).

Of these 63 articles, 11 were published in the month of April. Because the storm occurred on April 27, these articles only occurred within the last four days of the month. Twenty-nine articles were published in May, making this the highest monthly total for this study. In June, seven articles meeting these criteria were published. In August, six articles were published. In September only one relevant article was published during the seven days of the month included in the study.

There were 20 different employees mentioned or quoted in the sample of 63 articles. The official who was referenced or quoted most often was Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox, who appeared in 45 of the 63 articles. According to Lynch, having the mayor as a primary source was a deliberate choice by the city: "The mayor became the one voice of the city. Any kind of information that we had to release to the public or to the media, we would give to the mayor. We didn't want mixed messages with all the different departments saying their own thing" (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012). The next most frequently quoted employees were Tuscaloosa Police Chief Steve Anderson and Co-commander of Tuscaloosa Incident Command Robin Edgeworth, who were each referenced six times. Tuscaloosa City Clerk Tracy Croom was quoted or referenced four times. City Council Member Kip Tyner was referenced three times. Three different employees, City Council Member Lee Garrison, City Attorney Tim Nunnally, and Head of the Department of Planning and Development Services John McConnell, were each referenced two times. Twelve of the 20 employees/officials included in this study were only referenced once. They are Tuscaloosa Fire and Rescue Chief Alan J. Martin, City Council Member Bob Lundell, City Council Member Cynthia Almond, Tourism and Sports

Commission Executive Director Don Staley, Tuscaloosa Housing Authority Executive Director Ralph Ruggs, Fire and Rescue EMS Chief Travis Parker, City Council Member William Tinker, City Volunteer Coordinator LaDonnah Roberts, City Planner Bill Snowden, Assistant to Executive Director of Tuscaloosa Housing Authority Chris Hall, Co-commander of Tuscaloosa Incident Command John Brook, and City Council President Harrison Taylor.

Fifteen crisis response strategies were coded for. Of those, nine were found in the articles included in this study. The transcendence strategy, which involves shifting the focus from the immediate situation to a broader concern, was used most often. In this case, transcendence often referred to shifting the focus from the immediate damage caused by the tornado to the long-term restoration of the city after the storm. For instance, in his first statement after the storm, Tuscaloosa Mayor Walt Maddox said:

> This afternoon, Tuscaloosa was devastated by a tornado which has created death and destruction across our city. To my fellow citizens who are hurting tonight, in the days, weeks and months ahead, our city will rise to meet these challenges by dedicating every available resource…Tragedy and destruction has encompassed our city, but it will not conquer us. Rather, it will inspire us to demonstrate our patience, our faith and our confidence that a new day will certainly dawn (Morton, 2011a).

The mayor was the city official who used this strategy most often. However, several other employees used the transcendence strategy as well. For example, City Council Member Lee Garrison was quoted in the *Tuscaloosa News* as saying, "We're mourning the loss of a lot of people and a lot of souls. It was an absolutely tragic event, but we have to focus on rebuilding our community. There's a lot of work for a lot of years to come" (Jones, 2011). Additionally, this

strategy was utilized by Robin Edgeworth, legal affairs administrator in the office of the city attorney and co-commander of Tuscaloosa Incident Command. When addressing the process of creating Tuscaloosa Forward, she said, "During this recovery process the city continues to work to provide citizens avenues to express their plans, desires, and expectations as Tuscaloosa begins to move forward and we are hopeful that all citizens, especially those affected by the April storms will be engaged in our process to move Tuscaloosa forward" (DeWitt, 2011).

The victimage strategy, which is claiming that the organization is the victim rather than the perpetrator of the crisis, was the second most frequently used crisis response strategy. It was used 12 times. For instance, City Council Member Kip Tyner, whose property sustained serious damage from the storm, said, "None of us have [sic] ever experienced this type of thing before. I'm talking to people who don't know what to do next, and I feel at times so helpless that I can't help them right then. Where do you start?" (Taylor, 2011). Additionally, upon viewing a map of the path of destruction of the storm, Mayor Maddox said: "I think it's one of the worst things I've ever seen. I believe it shows, in terms of the statistical nature of the storm, it was indiscriminate of where it wreaked havoc. The debris fields are massive, the destruction is catastrophic" (Reynolds, 2011a).

Another strategy that was seen multiple times in the content analysis was endorsement, which is having a third party support the organization's crisis response efforts. The endorsement strategy was used 10 times. For instance, two days after the tornado struck Tuscaloosa, President Obama visited the city to examine the damage. After the visit, Mayor Maddox told the *Tuscaloosa News*, "I believe the president was deeply touched at what he saw here in the city of Tuscaloosa" (Morton, 2011b). The mayor also spoke about the support the city received from the state of Louisiana, "Both [Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal and New Orleans Mayor Mitch

25

Landrieu] have been tremendous partners for us in making sure we get the resources" (Morton, 2011d). Tuscaloosa Police Chief Steve Anderson also spoke to the *Tuscaloosa News* about the support that the city's police department received from law enforcement officials from other areas: "It makes us feel very good to know that our brothers and sisters in the law enforcement community are reaching out to us in this time of need and willing to do whatever it takes to make it possible for us to have a little bit of down time" (Reynolds, 2011c).

The strategy of ingratiation, which is praising stakeholders, was also used often, appearing in nine articles. In his first statement after the storm, Mayor Maddox used ingratiation to praise Tuscaloosa residents: "Of course, the real recovery will be seen in the relentless spirit of our citizens. Throughout Tuscaloosa, citizens are reaching out to each other, demonstrating that our strength and our faith will overcome all, even in this dark hour" (Morton, 2011a). The mayor also praised the accomplishments of individual citizens, like one woman who gave the city a quilt she made to commemorate the April 27 tornado: "Mrs. Chalker's gift is synonymous with the work of thousands within our community who have given their time, talent and treasure to our citizens in need" (Rupinski, 2011). Incident Co-Commander Robin Edgeworth also praised citizens, saying: "We are overwhelmingly impressed with the initiative shown by the residents and volunteers in this city as they work each day to remove debris not only from their own property but from neighbors and others impacted by the storm" (Morton, 2011e). Because the residents of Tuscaloosa are the city's largest group of stakeholders, these acknowledgements of the group's work could be considered a way for the government to maintain a positive relationship with constituents.

Corrective action refers to taking steps to prevent a similar crisis in the future. This strategy was used in six articles. An example was found in an article about the creation of the

city's rebuilding plan: "He said it took time, but the plan, once completed, helped create a better community. 'If we don't have a plan,' Snowden said, 'we run the risk of having what we had before'" (Morton, 2011f).

Compensation, which is providing financial support to crisis victims, was utilized five times. For this study, the definition of compensation was expanded to also include the financial support that the organization received in response to the crisis. An example is an article that includes the mayor's reaction to FEMA funds that would be disbursed to the city: "The agency also will begin providing reimbursements for expenses that city has generated as a result of the earlier April 15 tornado that damaged parts of the city. 'That will provide hundreds of thousands of dollars that we can put to use in this immediate disaster,' Maddox said" (Morton, 2011c).

Reminding involves mentioning past good deeds of the organization, and this approach was present in four articles. Tuscaloosa Housing Authority Executive Ralph Ruggs used this strategy when speaking about the progress that his department had made during the weeks immediately after the tornado. "We've made a significant dent in the rehousing effort already, and we anticipate being able to rehouse the remaining families within the next several weeks," Ruggs said (Wortham & Jones, 2011).

Excusing, which is minimizing the organization's responsibility for the crisis, was used three times. Mayor Maddox used this strategy in the immediate aftermath of the tornado. According to the *Tuscaloosa News*, "He also stressed that the size and impact of Wednesday's storm have provided a whole new set of challenges…'What we are trying to deal with is unprecedented,' Maddox said" (Grayson, 2011).

Of the strategies present in the articles, the least used was denial. This strategy was only used twice in response to rumors related to tornado response. When addressing accusations of looting in the days after the storm Mayor Maddox said:

> We don't have any outstanding reports of looting…Most of the reports that we receive seem to be more of the like of urban myth than it does actual facts. Does that mean that looting has occurred and we didn't make an arrest of we weren't notified? That is possible, but to my knowledge we haven't had any widespread looting (Reynolds, 2011b).

This strategy was also used by Police Chief Steve Anderson in response to unsubstantiated rumors of unreported dead bodies, improper storage of storm victim corpses in the morgue, and rapists preying on volunteers after daily cleanup efforts. "'The first two were so absurd we didn't have to investigate. As for the last one, we have had no victim reports. If one female had come forward, we would have applied all necessary resources. But I find it hard to believe something like this could happen without a single call to the police,' he said" (Cobb, 2011).

Six of the 15 strategies were not found in any of the articles in this study. These strategies are attacking the accuser, scapegoating, ignoring, justification, separation, and apologizing.

Each of the four categories of crisis response strategies (denying, diminishing, rebuilding, and reinforcing) was present in the study. The least used category was denying, which includes the attacking the accuser, denying, scapegoating and ignoring strategies, which was only used twice. The diminishing category, which includes excusing, justification, and separation, was used three times. Strategies from the rebuilding category were used most frequently, totaling 43 appearances in the articles used in this study. This category includes compensation, apology, corrective action, and transcendence. The reinforcing category was utilized 35 times. This is the

only category in which all of the strategies (reminding, ingratiation, victimage, and endorsement) were used at least once.

V.   Discussion

Communication Tactics

The answers to RQ1 and RQ2 provide a good description of the communication environment in Tuscaloosa after the tornado. For RQ1, the city used several communication tactics to disseminate information after the storm including media interviews, press conferences, press releases, and social media. The first three of these methods relied heavily on the relationship between the city and the media. According to Lynch, media interviews were conducted with various outlets like CNN, BBC, Associated Press, The Weather Channel, and *USA Today* (Lynch, 2011). These interviews were a way to broadcast the situation that was unfolding in Tuscaloosa. These interviews informed people living in the area about the crisis response and recovery efforts, and also reached people all over the world. Bringing attention to this situation potentially convinced more people to become involved in assisting with the recovery process.

The twice-a-day press conferences likely strengthened the relationship between the government and the local media. According to Lynch, the press conferences were the primary way for the government to disseminate information about the tornado to the media. The press conferences were often the first times that information from incident command briefings was presented to an audience outside of that organization. The various media outlets then presented this information to their audiences in several ways, such as playing video or audio clips of the conferences, airing the conferences in their entireties, or writing news articles about them. Through these actions, the media served as "middlemen" between the government and

Tuscaloosa residents, by allowing citizens to be informed of important events during the aftermath of the storm.

The city also used press releases to communicate after the storm. A total of 12 press releases were published in the month after the storm. Lynch said that the audience for the releases was primarily the media. The press releases were essentially written versions of information from press conferences. Because of this, the press releases were used less frequently, and only to highlight what was considered the most-important information. However, repetition of this information could potentially raise awareness of these issues among members of the media who, in turn, might be more likely to emphasize this information to their audiences.

Information from press conferences was also disseminated through social media. The repetition of this information via social media may have reinforced these messages to the audiences. In the immediate aftermath of the tornado, the city's Facebook and Twitter accounts were used to update publics of relevant information like injuries, power outages, debris areas, and aid stations. This tool allowed the city to instantaneously reach its audiences. Citizens did not have to wait for the media to disseminate this information, but could access it directly from the city almost as soon as it became available.

Crisis Response Strategies

As for RQ2, nine of the 15 crisis response strategies were present in the articles included in this study. Strategies from the rebuilding category were used most frequently, possibly because this crisis was a situation in which physical rebuilding was a large portion of the crisis recovery process. Also, it seems that strategies from this category did not involve blaming others for the crisis. Because the crisis discussed in this study is a natural disaster, there is no one

person or organization that was responsible for the event. These circumstances may have made Tuscaloosa's communicators less inclined to use strategies from other categories, like denying or diminishing, which can involve making excuses or shifting the blame for the crisis to another party.

In the rebuilding category, transcendence was by far the most used strategy. This strategy relates to a recurring theme in much of Tuscaloosa's communication after the storm, which is moving forward. Many statements by city employees/officials focused on the rebuilding process, especially opportunities for improvement after the storm. According to Lynch, the mayor said that he wanted to focus on improving the city after the storm, which may be why this theme was prevalent in the city's communication during this time. In fact, transcendence could be considered one of the cornerstones of the Tuscaloosa Forward plan.

Strategies from the reinforcing category were used fairly often as well. I find this surprising because Coombs (2007a) suggested that strategies from the reinforcing category should only be used in conjunction with strategies from other categories because reinforcing strategies only serve to improve the image of the organization. Although these strategies were often used with strategies from another category (most commonly rebuilding strategies), they were also used by themselves on a number of occasions. The usage of reinforcing strategies may have differed from Coombs' suggestions because his intended use of these strategies was for general crises, not specifically natural disasters. Because natural disasters often differ from other types of crises, crisis response strategies may be used differently in these situations.

Victimage was used most often in this category, and Liu and Levenshus (2011) provided the following example of this strategy: "the government is the victim of a catastrophic storm

rather than responsible for inadequate planning" (p.118). This example is fairly similar to the uses of the strategy by Tuscaloosa city employees. Aforementioned examples of this strategy by Mayor Maddox and City Council Member Kip Tyner served to illustrate the desolation that occurred because of the tornado. Quotations like these can be interpreted as attempts to demonstrate that the city was not responsible for the tornado, but was instead the victim of an unpredictable natural disaster. The usage of victimage could be considered contradictory to the usage of transcendence because it focuses on a past event rather than future opportunities for change and growth. However, the articles that include this strategy acknowledged the devastation of the tornado, but did not seem to portray the city as helpless in the aftermath. The city was often characterized by the strength of its citizens, and how they worked together to address this disaster.

This sentiment relates to the ingratiation strategy, which was used on most occasions to praise Tuscaloosa residents. Citizens are the largest and arguably most important stakeholders of the government. By highlighting the good deeds of citizens, government employees/officials were able to show how important this group is to the advancement of the city. Also, repeatedly mentioning this group's value is a way to potentially improve the relationship between the government and its residents.

Also from this category, the endorsement strategy was used a moderate amount of times. This strategy uses a third party to show support of the organization's crisis response efforts possibly as a way to build the organization's credibility with its stakeholders. City employees highlighted the support they received from other government officials, such as President Obama and other politicians like governors and legislators, and members of state and federal emergency response agencies. Also, the city used the support it received from celebrities to continuously

33

bring attention to this crisis. For instance, city officials made sure that visits from celebrities like Charlie Sheen, Kenny Chesney and Lance Bass received media coverage. In fact, Lynch said that Charlie Sheen's visit helped bring national media attention back to the Tuscaloosa tornado, after a decrease in coverage following the death of Osama Bin Laden.

The diminishing category was used infrequently, with excusing being the only strategy present from this group. Excusing was used to minimize the city's responsibility for the crisis. Liu and Levenshus (2011) stated that an example of this strategy would be "devastation from a tsunami was so extreme that the government could not immediately respond to all the citizens' needs" (p.116). This example is very similar to how Tuscaloosa representatives used this strategy. It was primarily used to illustrate the difficulty that the city would have responding to the crisis because of the unprecedented magnitude of the storm. The city lost several government facilities due to the tornado including a fire station, a police precinct, and the building that housed the environmental services department and the emergency management agency. This loss likely greatly hindered the city's capability to respond to the crisis, and diminishing strategies may have been used by city officials to illustrate this point.

The denying category was used least often, with also only one strategy (denying) present in the articles in the sample. This category may have been less prevalent because its strategies involve evading responsibility for a crisis through either shifting the blame or ignoring the situation. Neither of these tactics was seen in the media coverage of the city's communication during this time. The denying strategy was only used by city employees to respond to specific false claims. This strategy was used in response to rumors of looting, unreported crimes, and mismanagement of bodies of tornado victims during the immediate aftermath of the storm. The usage of denying strategies can be considered a way for city officials to control the

34

communication about the crisis response efforts through attempts to correct misinformation and stop the spread of rumors. Liu and Levenshus (2011) suggest that strategies from the denial category are most appropriate when responding to "rumors and unwarranted challenges" (p. 115). Based on this advice, Tuscaloosa representatives used this strategy in the proper manner, which is an indicator that they had good control of crisis communication in this situation.

The compensation strategy normally consists of an organization offering financial compensation to victims of the crisis. In the case of the April 27, 2011 tornado, the organization (Tuscaloosa) itself was a primary victim of the crisis. For this study, this strategy was expanded to also include the financial support the town received. The city did not disburse any funds to citizens who were storm victims, but instead used these funds to repair damage that the city sustained from the tornado. City officials acknowledged the disaster relief funds available to the city several times, possibly as a way to bolster Tuscaloosa's image among its residents. Highlighting this financial support could have been a way to show citizens that the city was well equipped to respond to the disaster because of this compensation. The use of the compensation strategy could have increased public trust in the city's ability to manage this crisis because of the additional resources that became available in the aftermath of the storm.

The two other strategies that were used were less noteworthy to this study. Corrective action, which is taking steps to prevent past mistakes from occurring again, was used less frequently than I assumed it would be. I thought this strategy would be used more often because it focuses on making improvements for the future, which was mentioned by city employees/officials on several occasions. However, these mentions rarely included the organization's past mistakes. Although corrective action may have been an underlying theme during the city's rebuilding efforts, it was not explicitly used by city officials very often.

Additionally, the reminding strategy was used to highlight how Tuscaloosa handled past crises positively. This strategy may have been used to assure stakeholders that this situation would be addressed effectively by the city.

Forty percent of the strategies were not used in any of the articles in this study. The strategy of apologizing, or expressing regret, may not have been used because the city was not at fault for the disaster and therefore could not take responsibility for causing the situation. Additionally, since the crisis was a natural disaster, the city did not employ the strategy of scapegoating, or stating that someone else is responsible for the crisis, likely because there was not another person or organization who could be blamed. Similarly, the attacking the accuser strategy was probably not used because there were no accusations from outside parties blaming the city for the tornado. The separation strategy, which is distancing the organization from an employee deemed responsible for the crisis, may not have been used because no one in the organization was not at fault, or could be blamed for the storm. Also, the ignoring strategy, which is the refusal to acknowledge that a crisis exists, was probably not used because the city employees could not pretend that this crisis did not occur, especially because of the magnitude of the damage.

The city official quoted most often in these articles was Mayor Maddox. According to Lynch, this frequency was not coincidental. As mayor, Maddox has routinely served as the official spokesperson for the town. Also, early in the crisis situation, it was decided that Maddox would be the primary city official to present information about the storm to the public. The use of only one city spokesperson likely minimized confusion in messages that the city disseminated to the media. The lack of confusion or mixed messages potentially allowed the city's message to be more salient to its audiences. The mayor may have served as the primary communicator for

36

the city because Tuscaloosa did not have an official public information officer before the storm. Because the city did not have a public information officer prior to the tornado, it could be inferred that communication may not have been highly valued within the city. However, after the storm Meredith Lynch was hired as the city's first official public relations practitioner, which shows that the city may have realized the importance of communication through this disaster.

Additionally, Lynch sent me several of the press releases released by the city at this time. However, these releases were rehashes of information from press conferences that were covered in the articles included in the content analysis. Because of this repetition, I felt they added no value to the study and decided not to include them.

VI.   Conclusion

Moving Forward

It's not surprising that the most prevalent crisis response strategy in this study was transcendence, which is moving forward from an immediate crisis to a larger concern. Much of the city's communication after the tornado focused on the future, instead of the past. However, through its communication, Tuscaloosa was able to strike a balance between acknowledging the past and looking towards the future. City communicators also showed the importance of the general public by communicating directly to them through social media and involving them in the planning of the recovery process. These practices align with best practices for crisis communication situations.

Additionally, Tuscaloosa Incident Command remains in operation, with no end date in sight. Most of the team members have other positions waiting for them when the department is terminated. Lynch said that she believes the department will still be operation until at least April 27, 2012, the one-year anniversary of the storm. The Incident Command Center will eventually be disbanded, and the storm recovery process will likely continue for years after that. Lynch explained that Tuscaloosa Forward represents the ongoing vision of the recovery process:

> Tuscaloosa Forward will be going on for years. We can't rebuild a city in a year. It's going to take five or 10 years; it's really a generational plan. We're rebuilding for the next generation of people coming to live in Tuscaloosa. Hopefully in the next three to five years you'll be able to tell that we have recovered. That's our goal, to look more like a town than a town that was hit by a tornado (M. Lynch, personal communication, February 6, 2012).

Although Tuscaloosa communicators may not have had experience handling this type of situation, in my assessment, they did an adequate job of responding to the devastating events of April 27, 2011. The crisis response strategies that were used most often (transcendence and victimage) were appropriate to highlight the catastrophic nature of the disaster and the city's goal to recover from this tragedy. Additionally, the primary methods used to disseminate information (such as press conferences and media interviews) seemed to be effective in reaching the local media and the general public. The city also began to utilize social media, but this communication method could have been used more throughout the crisis response and recovery process. Hopefully, this tactic will be utilized more often in the city's daily communication, and if Tuscaloosa faces another similar crisis. Also, it would have been ideal for the city to have an official communications employee prior to the tornado. However, during this situation the local government created the city's first official public relations position, which I believe shows that city officials realized the importance of communication in crises. If city officials continue to value communication in both routine and crisis situations, they should be able to adequately manage any challenges that Tuscaloosa could potentially endure.

I believe this crisis served as a valuable learning experience for Tuscaloosa and other cities that may face crises of this magnitude. This disaster was tragic, but it created opportunities for growth for the town. The emphasis on this aspect in the city's communication, specifically its rebuilding plan, demonstrates that city officials are aware of the positive outcomes that can manifest from a tragedy. Because of this experience, Tuscaloosa is likely more prepared to handle future similar crises.

Suggestions for Future Research

The scope of this study was fairly small, so there are a number of other topics related to Tuscaloosa's tornado recovery that could be explored through future research. For example, this study only examined one organization that responded to the tornado, Tuscaloosa Incident Command. Other organizations that responded to the tornado, such as Tuscaloosa County, FEMA, The University of Alabama, or the American Red Cross could also be studied. Also this study only examined a short period of time of an ongoing crisis recovery phase. Once the city is completely restored, a study could be conducted of the entire crisis recovery process. The Tuscaloosa Forward plan could also be evaluated to determine its effectiveness after it is completed.

This content analysis only included articles from one newspaper. Future studies could encompass other local media outlets, like television and radio stations, and compare this coverage to the national media attention that the crisis received. Further research could also include interviews with media representatives to see how they used news releases in their coverage. The city's official press releases, as well as it's usage of social media through Facebook and Twitter could be further explored. Additionally, a series of other tornadoes occurred during the same month as the Tuscaloosa tornado. Other studies could be conducted to compare and contrast the response strategies used by the different cities during these crises.

Although some crises may be unpredictable, they should not be surprising for government communicators. These officials should be as prepared as possible to effectively handle crisis situations. Tuscaloosa city officials/employees have likely learned this lesson from the tragic events of April 27, 2011, and should be better equipped to address crises in the future.

Other government communicators could also learn from Tuscaloosa's experiences to improve

their ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from crises.

VII. Appendices

Appendix A: List of Articles Used in Content Analysis

Date	Source	City Employee Quoted	Strategies
4/27/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110427/NEWS/110429737/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Morning-storm-damage-widespread-across-county	Mayor Walt Maddox, City Clerk Tracy Croom	Victimage
4/27/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110427/NEWS/110429687/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=APRIL-27-2011-Violent-tornado-leaves-path-of-destruction-through-Tuscaloosa-and-West-Alabama	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence, Ingratiation
4/28/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110428/NEWS/110429681/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=12-32-P-M-UPDATE-City-urges-water-conservation-limit-driving	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence, Victimage
4/29/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110429/NEWS/110429615/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Maddox-says-tornado-cut-a-6-mile-path-through-city	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence, Compensation
4/29/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110429/NEWS/110429633/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Mayor-hopes-to-resume-garbage-pickup-Thursday	Mayor Walt Maddox	Corrective Action
4/29/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110429/NEWS/110429645/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Tornado-one-for-the-history-books	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
4/29/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110429/NEWS/110429620/-1/TOPIC0410?p=4&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox	Endorsement
4/29/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.co	Mayor Walt Maddox	Excusing

	m/article/20110429/NEWS/110429596/-1/TOPIC0410?p=3&tc=pg		
4/30/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110430/NEWS/110439994/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=UA-confirms-five-students-killed-in-storm	Mayor Walt Maddox	Reminding
4/30/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110430/NEWS/110509975/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=City-to-begin-removing-debris-on-Wednesday	City Council Member Lee Garrison, City Attorney Timothy Nunnally	Transcendence, Compensation
4/30/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110430/NEWS/110509996/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Alberta-official-Kip-Tyner-hit-hard-by-city-s-damage	City Council Member Kip Tyner	Transcendence, Victimage
5/1/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110501/NEWS/110509998/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Mayor-death-toll-may-rise-curfew-remains	Mayor Walt Maddox	Reminding, Denial
5/1/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110501/NEWS/110509969/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=City-releases-names-of-tornado-victims	Mayor Walt Maddox	Victimage
5/2/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110502/NEWS/110509934/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Mayor-updates-death-toll-estimates-clean-up-costs	Mayor Walt Maddox	Compensation
5/3/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110503/NEWS/110509903/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=240-still-missing-as-rescue-efforts-continue	Mayor Walt Maddox, Fire and Rescue Chief Alan J. Martin	Endorsement, Excusing
5/3/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110503/NEWS/110509915/-1/TOPIC0410?p=3&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence, Victimage
5/3/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.co	Mayor Walt Maddox	Compensation

	m/article/20110503/NEWS/110509922/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=FEMA-state-officials-move-quickly-to-boost-federal-action		
5/3/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110503/NEWS/110509904/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Police Chief Steve Anderson	Endorsement, Victimage
5/4/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110504/NEWS/110509862/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Louisiana-comes-to-aid-missing-count-drops	Mayor Walt Maddox, Police Chief Steve Anderson	Endorsement
5/6/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110506/NEWS/110509777/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=City-weighs-options-for-rebuilding	Mayor Walt Maddox, City Council Member Bob Lundell	Transcendence
5/6/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110506/NEWS/110509763/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Debris-removal-to-begin-soon-seven-still-missing	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
5/7/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110507/NEWS/110509702/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox	Ingratiation, Transcendence
5/9/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110509/NEWS/110509687/-1/TOPIC0410?p=3&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
5/9/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110509/NEWS/110509666/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
5/10/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110510/NEWS/110509655/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Maddox-rescinds-curfew-in-tornado-stricken-areas	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
5/10/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110510/NEWS/110509652/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	City Council Members Cynthia Almond and Kip Tyner, Tourism and Sports Commission Executive Director Don Staley	Endorsement
5/10/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110510/NEWS/11	Mayor Walt Maddox, Tuscaloosa Housing Authority	Reminding, Transcendence,

		Executive Director Ralph Ruggs	Endorsement
	0509653/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Housing-authority-HUD-quick-to-find-much-needed-housing-		
5/11/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110511/NEWS/110519959/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox, City Council Member Lee Garrison	Reminding, Compensation
5/12/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110512/FRONTPAGE/110519898/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Israeli-consul-tours-Tuscaloosa	Mayor Walt Maddox	Endorsement
5/12/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110512/NEWS/110519896/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Chesney-to-donate-concert-fees-to-tornado-relief-effort	Mayor Walt Maddox	Endorsement
5/15/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110515/NEWS/110519802/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Rumors-tall-tales-spread-rapidly-in-wake-of-devastating-tornado-	Police Chief Steve Anderson	Denial
5/15/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110515/NEWS/110519800/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Emergency-responders-faced-challenge-just-after-tornado	Police Chief Steve Anderson, Fire and Rescue EMS Chief Travis Parker	Victimage
5/15/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110515/NEWS/110519799/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Maddox-weathers-biggest-test	Mayor Walt Maddox, Police Chief Steve Anderson	Victimage, Transcendence
5/20/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110520/NEWS/110519621/-1/TOPIC0410?p=1&tc=pg	Co-commander of Incident Command Robin Edgeworth	Ingratiation
5/21/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110521/NEWS/110529981/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
5/24/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110524/NEWS/110529814/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Disaster-relief-fund-has-1-3-million-but-none-yet-disbursed	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence

Date	URL	Names	Categories
5/24/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110524/NEWS/110529805/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox	Endorsement, Ingratiation
5/25/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110525/NEWS/110529770/-1/TOPIC0410?p=1&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox, City Council Member William Tinker	Transcendence
5/26/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110526/NEWS/110529699/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Yankees-pitcher-Tuscaloosa-native-lends-hand-to-tornado-relief	Mayor Walt Maddox	Endorsement
5/31/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110531/NEWS/110539989	City Clerk Tracy Croom	Transcendence, Victimage
6/2/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110602/NEWS/110609945	Mayor Walt Maddox, City Volunteer Coordinator LaDonnah Roberts, Police Chief Steve Anderson	Transcendence, Victimage
6/5/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110605/NEWS/110609880	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
6/10/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110610/NEWS/110619989	City Planner Bill Snowden	Corrective Action
6/23/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110623/NEWS/110629874/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=City-disputes-nearly-1-million-food-charge-following-tornado	City Attorney Tim Nunnally	Victimage
6/24/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110624/NEWS/110629838/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Germany-visit-aimed-at-luring-jobs	City Clerk Tracy Croom	Transcendence
6/27/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110627/NEWS/110629740/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Two-months-after-the-April-27-storm-survivors-work-to-rebuild	Mayor Walt Maddox	Ingratiation, Transcendence
6/30/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110630/NEWS/110629597/-1/TOPIC0410?p=3&tc=pg	Assistant to Executive Director of Tuscaloosa Housing Authority Chris Hall	Ingratiation
7/1/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.co	Mayor Walt Maddox	Ingratiation,

	m/article/20110701/NEWS/110639984		Transcendence
7/6/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110706/NEWS/110709830/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Quilt-serves-as-remembrance-of-April-27-victims	Mayor Walt Maddox	Ingratiation
7/8/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110708/NEWS/110709754/-1/TOPIC0410?p=1&tc=pg	Co-commander of Incident Command Robin Edgeworth	Excusing
7/13/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110713/NEWS/110719913/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Co-commanders of Incident Command Robin Edgeworth and John Brook, Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
7/17/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110717/NEWS/110719761	City Clerk Tracy Croom, Head of Department of Planning and Development Services John McConnell	Transcendence
7/21/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110721/NEWS/110729963	Mayor Walt Maddox	Corrective Action
7/24/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110724/NEWS/110729879/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Co-commander of Incident Command Robin Edgeworth	Corrective Action
7/25/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110724/NEWS/110729879/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Co-commander of Incident Command Robin Edgeworth	Transcendence
7/28/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110728/NEWS/110729741/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Zoning-rules-may-limit-Taco-Casa-8217-s-15th-Street-cactus-	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
8/3/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110803/NEWS02/110809930/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=City-approves-demolition-of-private-structures	Co-commander of Incident Command Robin Edgeworth	Justification
8/4/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110804/NEWS/110809912/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=Insurance-disputes-slow-storm-debris-removal	Mayor Walt Maddox	Corrective Action
8/5/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.co	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence

	m/article/20110805/NEWS/110809873/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=100-days-after-tornado-residents-see-progress-problems-		
8/6/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110806/NEWS/110809839/-1/TOPIC0410?p=2&tc=pg	Mayor Walt Maddox	Ingratiation, Transcendence
8/7/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110807/NEWS/110809855/-1/TOPIC0410?Title=AT-LARGE-Tornado-8217-s-aftermath-will-be-long-lasting	Mayor Walt Maddox	Transcendence
8/30/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110830/NEWS/110839996/1007/news?Title=Council-set-to-vote-on-Tuscaloosa-Forward-plan-next-week	City Council President Harrison Taylor , Mayor Walt Maddox, John McConnell	Corrective Action
9/7/2011	http://www.tuscaloosanews.com/article/20110907/NEWS/110909820	City Council Member Kip Tyner	Transcendence, Victimage

Appendix B: Interview Guide

1. What is your role at Tuscaloosa Incident Command? When did you begin working at TIC?
2. How was the Tuscaloosa Incident Command Center created? What is its primary goal?
3. What methods were used to disseminate information to the public?
4. Was social media used in the communication process? How so? Who controls the city's Twitter and Facebook accounts?
5. What were the key messages that the city wanted to disseminate to the public?
6. Did the city have a crisis plan? Had any employees received crisis training?
7. What were your routine tasks as a communicator prior to the storm and after? How did they change?
8. Where did the idea for Tuscaloosa Forward come from? What are the goals of the plan?
9. What type of research was done in the process of creating the plan?
10. What is your role in Tuscaloosa Forward?
11. When will Tuscaloosa Incident Command Center be shut down?

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