Corporate apologia and the attribution of guilt

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This paper argues that in the difficult disciplines of crisis communication and image restoration, *attribution theory* has explanatory value. Corporate apologia – the explanations that an organisation offers after an attack on – differs with the type of crisis it is designed to diffuse, and if the crisis concerns legitimacy, the art is to shift the public attribution of guilt or responsibility. The case of Arla *vs* Hirtshals is used to demonstrate how a concerted effort in impression management succeeded in just such a shift.

In Public Relation circles there is a belief that having good stakeholder relations means Never Having to Say You're Sorry.

Since there is a steadily growing body of work about crisis management and image restoration vis-à-vis stakeholders that deals with ways of saying, if not exactly "sorry", then "we are very concerned", it must follow either that a large number of organisations have a less than perfect stakeholder communication programme, or that the truth is more complicated.

Stakeholders, the different groups that have a vested interest, could be shareholders or customers of a company, or users of a product or neighbours to the plant where it is produced; when a company faces a crisis, it is normally the customers and the wider public that are addressed, as these are the groups that are most important for the company's reputation and hence for its survival.

Crisis management, and also its younger cousin, issues management, will normally entail that something untoward has happened, and that the organisation is being blamed for it by the public. The response can be analysed in terms of rhetorical skills, and recent literature has contributed to an understanding of the rhetorical base that supports the selection of frames in corporate communication (e.g. the anthology edited by Millar and Heath 2004).

Classical rhetoric is not just communication that aims to persuade, i.e. to influence receivers to react in a particular way regarding a judgement to be made; it is also about changing receivers' opinion about an event that has already taken place through explanation. The classical *apologia* is just such an explanation; it is *not* an apology (although it may contain one), it is "speaking in one's own defence". If stakeholders can be made to frame the event in a suitable way, i.e. to see the event

through the company's eyes, they can be made to understand all, and forgive all. The literature in this subsection of crisis management is growing, with titles like "Corporate apologia" (Hearit 2001), "On organizational apologia" (Rowland and Jerome 2004) and *Crisis management by apology* (Hearit 2006); evidently the rhetorical angle attracts more interest than it used to. The question is how it works in practice.

This study sets out to demonstrate some of the established ways of *excusing and justifying* unethical behaviour that is treated in the crisis management literature; and secondly, since this is normally neglected, also to look at the organisation's image restoration strategy in terms of expected *reader response*. Theories of influence borrowed from social psychology will be used to predict shifts in reader opinion. In particular, the study will draw on the complex known as *impression management*, as parts of it are commonly used as a theoretical base for analysing receiver reactions.

Impression management (IM) is the cover term used for the verbal and non-verbal tactics employed to actively construct a favourable image. As it will be outlined below, the theory encompasses other-focussed and self-focussed moves (attempts to please the receiver, or to enhance the speaker's status in the eyes of the receiver), and it distinguishes between assertive and defensive measures (attempts to enhance the speaker's reputation, or to defend him or her against an accusation). Analyses of IM are found mostly in organisational interaction, particularly in interviews, as a potent way of examining the sources of influence in organisations (Tedeschi 1990, Rosenfeld et al. 2002, Huczynski 2004). The defensive part of IM that is concerned with explanations and justifications, or *accounts*, has been particularly influential in the crisis literature.

Finally, the theory of *attribution*, also borrowed from social psychology, will be applied. Attribution is the psychological process of ascribing traits to another participant in the interaction, and for organisational communication, the main problem is ascribing responsibility or guilt. Since this takes place from the point of view of the stakeholder, it allows us to perspectivise the analysis of attempted manipulation of impressions.

It will be argued that if the crisis concerns *legitimacy* and unethical behaviour, justification is not enough to restore reputation. To produce the desired shift in framing, the audience must be made to share some of the organisation's concerns. On the basis of a particular restoration campaign in a major dairy

concern, this study will make a case for *group affiliation* as a major factor: it is arguable that in this case, it was the fostering of a sense of values shared with the customers that worked for the company.

1. Apologia and Impression management

Everyone tries to manage other people's impressions of themselves, in order to present a competent and likeable front. Thus there are no necessary cynical implications at all, but since Goffman first used the term (Goffman 1959), it has been common to treat front-stage, on-purpose behaviour as a performance and hence somehow less genuine than back-stage, relaxed, and therefore more characteristic behaviour. In the case of companies, there is the added assumption that everything that comes out of the Public Relations department is a purposeful performance. In the following, the company will be treated much like a person, inasmuch as we are dealing with the company's public *persona*, the "mask" or "figure" that carries the company's image and reputation. The assumption is that if the company is being blamed for misbehaving, the attribution of guilt and responsibility will work in the same way as if a person had done it.

As mentioned above, impressions need different kinds of management according to the goal, especially if defence is called for. In the crisis management literature, two scholars have dominated the discussion of organisational defence, viz. Benoit and Coombs (Benoit 1995, 1997, 2004; Brinson and Benoit 1999; Coombs 1999, 2002; Coombs and Holladay 2002, 2004). However, as their typologies of defensive moves have common roots in the accounts literature (see e.g. Buttny 1993), no distinction needs to be made here. The list below will follow Coombs (1999) in terminology.

1.1 Defensive types

When an accusation has been levelled at a speaker (or an organisation for whom the person speaks), the accounts used to exonerate the speaker typically concentrate on efforts to minimise the implications of harm, responsibility, or breach of norms. In corporate apologia, in Coomb's treatment, it is possible to distinguish *apology, excuses, and justifications*.

An *apology* entails that the speaker
- *Assumes responsibility* for what happened
- Expresses regret and accepts a possible punishment
- Offers redress if damage has been done, and
- Seeks forgiveness

For organisations, this is clearly hard, especially at an early stage of a crisis, because legally speaking, accepting responsibility can be extremely costly. The organisation may offer redress, e.g. by helping villagers where a chemical plant has exploded, while insisting that they are doing it out of charity. Typical statements include regretful non-apologies like "We are truly appalled that a thing like this could happen at our plant, and doing everything we can to help."

Excuses are found when the speaker does not accept involvement. Here the speaker
- *Denies responsibility*
- Denies intention and volition
- Denies agency and/or attempts scapegoating

Typical excuses run "it wasn't me", "I didn't mean to" and "I couldn't possibly have known". In organisations, this often means pointing to someone outside the organisation who is ultimately responsible, e.g. international regulations for safety procedures. But of course it is always possible to subdivide responsibility, so that there is a sliding scale into the next category, where a little responsibility is accepted.

Justifications are very variegated. Here the speaker
- *Accepts responsibility, but*
- Denies that (much) harm was done, or claims that the victim deserved it
- Re-frames or re-zones the problem,
- Differentiates issues or agents,
- Makes comparisons with others, not at present accused,
- Denies a (small) part of the problem, or
- Claims higher norm or fairness principle

This is the ground where most organizations manage their crises, and they often rely on pragmatic inference for effect. For example, many accusations of malpractice are denied in very

restrictive terms, so that recipients themselves may infer the speaker's innocence, while the legal damage has been minimized in case of forced future retractions. In Tour de France interviews an athlete may say, "The accusation that I used EPO is nonsense - I have never tested positive for EPO". In strictly logical terms, it is presumably a fact that no positive test exists, but it is merely an inference that no positive test *could* have existed with more thorough testing.

Typical moves for differentiation isolate a few individuals and point out that they are unlike the rest, "There are rotten apples in every organisation and we have fired the responsible manager". In the case of comparatives, a farmer from an EU country could argue "We have no choice but to follow suit with practices we would rather avoid [e.g. conditions for animals transported to a slaughterhouse] because our competitors elsewhere in Europe have easier conditions"; re-zoning could be "There is no animal welfare issues here, for as we interpret the rules, we need not follow EU regulations for rest and water once we are on Russian territory, and therefore this is merely a case for international transport agreements".

Shifting the responsibility upwards in an honourable manner implies that a higher norm was applicable, like "We owed it to our shareholders/ the taxpayers/ the people who voted for us to adopt this procedure, as it was clearly in their best interest, although it was a painful decision to make". This kind of move not only aims to minimise guilt and harm, but to point out that at least one group of stakeholders should be positively grateful.

Flat *denials*, like "I don't know what you are talking about, I never received any kickback from the contractors", rely on fact. They are relatively easy to deal with, for as long as they are believed (or cannot be disproved in court). There are borderline cases: for example, it will be remembered that in President Clinton's statement under oath, "I did not have sex with that woman", this was actually a differentiation manoeuvre; in his definition, since he left the work to his partner, *she* had sex with him, but *he* did not have sex with her. Again, pragmatic inference is doing the work (i.e. if the speaker is innocent in his own definition, and if, as in normal circumstances, relevant information has been given in full cooperation, then he is also innocent in the receiver's judgement.)

1.2   Assertive types

Impression management that aims to induce the hearer to like or admire the speaker is divided into moves that focus on the recipient, and moves that focus on the speaker. Of the many subtypes treated in the IM literature, a few are particularly relevant for dealing with a crisis:

- *Ingratiation*, which may mean
- Opinion conformity (making the recipient feel knowledgeable)
- Other-enhancement like Compliments (making the recipient feel good), and
- Favours (making the recipient feel indebted).

In terms of crisis response, this is the difficult operation of saying "We hear you, you are right, you have a point – but you are really wrong, for we were not at fault". Favour doing, on the other hand, consists in the company making itself useful to the stakeholders by providing services; customers will not generally keep up a grudge against a company whose services they enjoy.

On the self-boosting side, image building is very largely a matter of installing in others a favourable notion of a company through product satisfaction and pleasant associations with the corporate brand, like credibility, durability, fun etc., depending on the customer segment and stakeholder range. *Self-enhancement* comes in varieties of:

- Bolstering (claiming that speaker deserves credit on a number of scores)
- Burying (suppressing unwanted information or memories)
- Boosting (upgrading connections with the right sources of glamour or credibility)
- Acclaiming (taking credit for a good idea), and
- Being an Example, which is normally used about 'a shining example ', i.e. a person who gathers credit by being seen to work hard, but which, in this context, could also mean 'being a victim', i.e. being seen to be hit by the same forces that are blamed for the rest of the damage done.

In connection with crisis management and subsequent image restoration, bolstering moves are necessarily frequent: "Look what we have done for local employment / the charities we have sponsored / the local community we are part of". For burying,

the easiest way of making people forget an unfortunate connection, e.g. having worked for Enron, is to retouch the mental photographs and remove all references to the connection from one's web page, as a number of former employees, now senior US officials, have done. Another tactic is to have a standard phrase about "looking ahead after we have put difficult times behind us": this is what is normally found in annual reports after a year of catastrophe, especially after a change of leadership.

While the interest in corporate apologia has meant that the defensive moves have been widely discussed in the crisis literature, the notion of ingratiation was not much in evidence before Allen and Caillouet (1994). It is now commonly agreed that successful apologia has both a defensive side of justification and an assertive side that is closer to public relation efforts under normal conditions, i.e. drawing attention to the praiseworthy and attractive sides of the business.

Corporate apologia, then, should be tailored according to the demands of the situation. In the following case, we shall examine the influence of the *type* of crisis, the *alternative story* that the company sought to tell, and the *voice*, or indeed *voices*, they chose for their persona.

2. The case: the dairy company Arla Foods

The Arla Foods Group is Europe's second largest dairy company, employing 18,000 people. It is a co-operative owned at the time of the crisis by about 11,000 Danish and Swedish milk producers. Since milk is a low-involvement product, it used to be completely uncontroversial that the dairy company grew to monopoly size in Denmark, with just a handful of small, independent dairies left. Danish export of butter and cheese was a matter of national pride.

But in the 1990's the press started writing about unhealthy monopoly behaviour: there was the case of the sudden and dramatic price increase for large milk deliveries to hospitals and institutions, which drew an instant differentiation response when it was blamed on an inexperienced manager. Then there was the case of the small organic dairy producers who wished to leave the co-operative; for organic farmers, contracts were binding for 25 months, as against the normal 12 months, with prohibitive fines for leaving.

Organic milk became a problem in itself: not only did Arla make little effort to sell the surplus organic milk, it maintained the

sharp price difference that made organic milk prohibitively expensive and encouraged a return to industrial production to get rid of the over-production. Concern among customers was visible not only in the press coverage but also in letters to newspapers. Eventually Arla, the biggest producer of organic milk in the country, came to be seen as an enemy of organic farming that should be stopped, and legal intervention was rumoured. At this point many customers began looking for alternative milk cartons in their local supermarket.

Though these stories were damaging to Arla's popular image, they did not constitute a crisis. That, however, was the magnitude of the response that another event aroused: the near-monopoly's efforts to strangle a small competitor. Late in 2003 Arla was taken to court for abusing its market position by illegally paying a large wholesaler to remove the products of a small organic dairy, Hirtshals, from their shelves. The media reported the court case and described the meeting where two Arla sales employees gave the wholesaler, Metro, what was called a "marketing subsidy"; the Metro purchasing manager joyfully e-mailed a friend, relating how she had secured a large marketing subsidy, in return for which she would kill the new Hirtshals contract at once. Long before Arla was eventually found guilty and fined, the corporate image had suffered badly among consumers. Arla lost one in eight customers virtually overnight.

2.1   Arla's response in terms of impression management

As a crisis response, the case was not typical, in the sense that the response had to address a stakeholder that had not suffered any damage whatsoever. The customers must be won back, but they had never complained about the quality of the product. The issue was legitimacy, and hence the Arla persona's ethos (Massey 2001).

Being perceived as unethical is a complex problem. Using attribution theory, Coombs and Holladay (2004) originally argued that companies chose different strategies according to the crisis type they were involved in, and that the most characteristic feature of the crisis was the amount to responsibility ascribed to the corporation. Thus, if there was no visible intention or volition, the crisis could be classed as either an accident or a case of fellow-victim suffering. A frequently cited example is the Tylanol crisis: a madman tampering with bottles of pharmaceutical products was hardly something that the corporation could be held responsible

for, but it was tackled with a massive recall of the product, and thus Tylanol has served textbooks for years as an example of correct response: swift, certainly expensive, but putting an end to all anxiety. The more it is possible for agents to predict ("they should have known this could happen"), the more the public is likely to blame them for carelessness. Similarly, the more possible risk a case involves, the more the public will blame agents for arrogance ("they don't care about risks to users"). Finally, if there is a history – they have done it before – then the public will be quick to judge.

This means that types of crises where the company can class itself as a fellow victim are reasonably safe, as are types that can be classed as accidents. Misbehaviour, however, is different. Arla had misbehaved and was held responsible; the incident could not be treated as an accident or a careless slip. Apologia was called for; but in this case, speakers on behalf of the company seem to have used all available response categories over a period of time.

Apology was out of the question. With a court case pending, it was impossible for Arla to apologize in public, even if it had wanted to. However, as the campaign was rolled out, the company really did try to *redress* past wrongs by seeking collaboration with small organic dairies e.g. over common advertising of organic milk and a common system of transportation crates for milk cartons. Arla also published a large and thorough ethical manifesto (called "Our responsibility") on its website, addressing issues of animal welfare and relations with other dairies. Since Arla was interesting to the press, this initiative was also covered and well received, and in all probability this display of good will was the single biggest factor in normalising relations with customers.

Excuses were limited to the denial of intention and volition by the company. Arla claimed that the Hirtshals incident happened without the knowledge of top management. In acute crises where the figure of the CEO is central, a manager may indeed be seen to take the responsibility, but, as it has been noted by Hearit, among other scholars, this is normally seen as purely symbolic. If a bank or airline crashes, no-one expects the CEO to commit hara-kiri; but when President Reagan declared that "angry as I may be about [the dealings that went on at the White House in the Iran-Contra scandal]…, it is still my responsibility", it produced headlines hailing the chief as a man who did not shirk his responsibility. In Arla's case, the responsibility issue was subdivided, and dealt with as differentiation: the two salespersons who forced the

exclusion of the Hirtshals dairy were presented as solely responsible.

Further *justification* was offered concerning the accusations about unfair treatment of organic milk producers: Arla's procedure was simply normal practice in the face of over-production.

Finally, *denial* was the basis of the defence: what Arla had done was offering the wholesaler, Metro, a marketing subsidy in connection with their 40th anniversary, which is normal practice and legal. Therefore, there was no case against Arla.

On the positive or assertive front, Arla set out to win sympathy. For one thing, the case was framed, not as the story of a big (monopoly) player squashing a small one, but as yet another small player in a struggle for survival in an increasingly competitive market, with the mighty German producers just south of the border as the looming threat. Coombs calls this strategy *suffering*: as a victim defending itself, Arla's general behaviour was lifted up into another story.

But first and foremost, the company engaged in serious, concerted *ingratiation*. On the self-boosting side, Arla developed a large quality manifesto, corresponding to its ethical manifesto, called "The Arla Farm", where the company could be seen to be taking care of all sorts of social responsibilities. This classic *bolstering* move served to replace the image of the cynical monopoly. More efficient, however, was the effort to be useful to the customers, providing recipes, advice, inspiration and an interactive forum to be heard in for customers who wanted to voice opinions. This was the creation of the Arla Forum, the web-based hub of the image restoration campaign. The choice bore out the tenet that the web is an indispensable tool for changing the public's view of the past, and shaping their interpretations of future actions (Tucker & Melewar 2005).

2.2   The website: the many faces of Arla

The establishment of the Arla Forum on the web was announced with full-page advertisements in the Danish newspapers. They contained an open letter from the then CEO, Åke Modig, about the company's earnest wish to be seen as open and helpful and engaging in dialogue with the consumers – a move which was to be expected in this sort of campaign – and a very large photograph of the handsome CEO in a jaunty windbreaker with his arm round the neck of a photogenic cow with an ear-tag, which was perhaps

rather a new development. The connection with "nature" has become a trademark: annual reports have since featured the traditional group photos of board members in green fields (without the cow, however).

The customer website is different from the corporate website of Arla Foods, which contains the corporate material like reports, press releases, visions and missions, the manifestos etc. The consumer site is kept red and white, Danish national colours and traditionally used by Karoline, the sweetly naïve, flower-munching, tablecloth-chequered cardboard cow that was the trademark of the "old" dairy company and instantly recognizable to the Danish public. However, the most striking feature of the web page, at its introduction, was the number of faces with names: real people. This, too, has remained after the successful image restoration campaign.

From its launch, the restoration home page consisted of a tight collection of clusters, i.e. local groupings of multi-media items, e.g. pictures, captions, links to other fora, video clips etc. The busy website was characterised by semiotic cascades, i.e. the progressive integration of layered multiplying potential (Baldry and Thibault 2006). This is a feature that is shared with many large companies that use their website to nurture customer relations and present their products in an active way, to get the customer to "spend time with the brand"; what was special in this case was that practically all clusters had not just pictures, but faces in them.

For example, the provision of recipes was clearly seen as an important service, and the archive quickly became very widely used, according to the annual reports. But even the recipes had names and faces: there was a Cook of the Month, and he or she was introduced with family photographs and a short bio-note; the recipes had a personal touch with an authentic first-person narrative voice. Another group of faces belonged to the company's guides for visitors. The website was (and is) also an interactive channel that arranges for visits to farms and dairies, and here prospective visitors could "meet" the guides on the web, for the link was accompanied by a group photo of uniformed people looking enthusiastic.

The traditional marketing function of a customer website is to showcase new products, and as the Arla campaign was rolled out, new products were given room on the page; but the cluster also contained links to video clips of the television commercials that were produced at the time. These films had a common schedule: they were introduced by an authentic, young female production

manager from the headquarters in Aarhus, who was filmed talking to the people behind the new product. Thus the commercial for the new "regional milk", a product that was supposed to give customers a sense of product-with-a-history, was a conversation between the manager and a middle-aged dairy farmer woman walking through the landscape where the cows were grazing in the southern Jutland salty marshes, talking about milk and a sense of belonging. Since most milk is bought by women shoppers, most of whom have jobs, there was a strong invitation to identify with the two professional women, who projected a sense of caring for their work and what they produced.

Finally and most noteworthy, the new Arla website introduced a Forum for dialogue. The vast majority of questions asked concerned milk, yoghurt and other products, but some also concerned the corporation and (particularly at the beginning) its unacceptable behaviour. All, even highly critical and apparently unscreened comments, received courteous answers, and the company evidently took the opportunity to explain, justify and re-frame the story in their answers. For a treatment of this aspect, see Bülow-Møller (2007).

The forum also contained very early examples of corporate blogs in Denmark, and again, this medium produced an exceptional sense of closeness and authenticity in the customer communication. Authentic people with dairy-related jobs blogged about aspects of interest to the customer. Thus the resident cook, a personable blonde woman, blogged about seasonal recipes and the developments in the experimental Arla kitchen, and the health consultant wrote about health and well-being, particularly about children's needs; there was a common-interest blog from a farm in Jutland, describing daily life for a milk producer, and there were no less than two corporate blogs from the staff, one from the press officer and one from the personel manager, discussing the image of Arla in the press. This wealth of inside information was unique and merits further attention; it is arguable that the aim was to shift this part of the website from a communications-based network to an affinity-based network, i.e. to create a different and more affective kind of interest in the community of users (Raghavan 2006).

The farm blog, called "Life on Brook Farm", was introduced as "Inge and Mikael's blog", despite the fact that only the husband, Mikael, actually wrote. In translation, the introductory paragraph runs,

> We are [Inge og Mikael Nørby Lassen](#), and we have a farm near Ribe with 200 brindled cows. Mikael has been in the co-operative since 1997. In our blog you can read about life on the farm and my comments on stories in the press about Arla.

The impression that the reader gets of Mikael is that of an opinionated professional who has little respect for stories in the press (ill-founded if you know enough about dairy production) and for sentimental and uninformed views on animal husbandry. The very first contribution on the blog was sparked by a inaccurate press story about unproductive cows, "loser cows", and a letter to one of the newpapers from a city dweller that recommended tender care for the unfortunate cows, cited by Mikael (in translation) as *Go and put an arm lovingly around the cow's neck and scratch its ears and pat it. Unless it has some disease, I think that will do it good*. This quotation is followed by the comment "That solution is reeeally a bit far out", and a snapshot of a man patting a cow's hind quarters, with the caption "Here's our herdsman trying out the theory ☺". Characteristically, the answering comments were all from farmers, agreeing that romanticised images of country life is a problem. But in the annual report following the image restoration campaign, it was this blog that was mentioned, as a successful attempt to bridge the gap between producers and customers. Mikael's efforts as an authentic professional were felt to be sincerely innovative.

The two corporate blogs were written by the man most in the public eye, the press officer (Honoré), whose blog was called "Between the lines", and one of the architects behind the forum (Møller), whose blog, "Considerations", dealt with internal matters. In these two cases, the corporation was directly represented by named people with personal opinions talking more-or-less spontaneously to the stakeholders about what concerned them: misrepresentation in the press (which could fortunately be rectified now that there was a forum where Arla could answer back and tell the true story), and the joys and set-backs for the staff working for the company (not always an easy place to work, since the unfairly tarnished public image saddened the employees). In the same way as fellow farmers were indirectly addressed by Mikael, the corporate blogs presumably served as internal morale-boosting for Arla employees, while also presenting a front to external stakeholders.

The following is an early example of Arla's distinctive brand of meta-communication. Honoré cites an interview in the media

section of the business newspaper *Børsen*, where one of the largest PR consultants in the country had called the new Arla campaign *overkill*: *… all at once Arla is attempting every kind of communication with its campaign, story telling, blogging and dialogue on the Arla forum. Not very smart.* (*Børsen*, 9.11.05). Honoré is baffled, for the consultant has not explained why:

> Is it not very smart to blog in Arla's situation? Should we not run tv commercials where our farmers answer questions from the consumers? Or is it stupid to offer dialogue with Arla's staff and cooperative partners on the Arla Forum? If anyone has an idea about this, I'm listening! (Between the lines, 09.11.2005)

It is not normal for a corporation to discuss its own media strategy with the stakeholders who are supposed to be influenced by it. It does, however, feel surprisingly genuine and engenders a remarkable sense of closeness. Far from a faceless and cynical monopoly, the Arla website puts on stage a large group of everyday people engaged in producing the best product they can, and interested in talking to everyone who wants to talk about their concerns.

3. Image restoration: the factors

As it will have transpired, Arla did much more than just explain. For many stakeholders, Arla succeeded in transferring its version of events, and in moving the focus from the past to the present and future, so that its own framing became the shared version.

In terms of *ethos*, Arla came out of the crisis with a persona with a much higher end status (or "terminal ethos", if the campaign is seen as a speech, where the rhetor's personal standing with the audience shifts as he or she goes along). Traditionally in rhetoric, ethos is measured as a function of the rhetor's perceived expertness, trustworthiness, good will, sociability, sincerity and subscription to values that are held in common with the audience (see for example McCroskey 2001). We have seen the efforts that Arla made to prove that they could produce expert knowledge about any consumer concern related to dairy products, and their good will was documented in the very open forum, where even the harshest criticism was published and acknowledged. The hefty documents of ethical

standards and quality guarantees vouched for sincerity, and finally, there were extraordinary efforts to share concerns with customers and other stakeholders like fellow cooperative producers, in the blogs. The sense of shared concerns invited identification, and hence shared values. By 2006, Arla was one of us.

In terms of *story*, Arla had not quite supplanted the story of the monopoly squashing the small dairy, but it had certainly launched a competing story with a different role distribution (a strategy recommended by Heath 2004). To start with, Arla was not a villain; rather, the company was embarrassed by a couple of over-eager representatives, who had not done anything illegal in giving Metro an anniversary marketing contribution and perhaps indirectly suggesting that a little quid-pro-quo would be highly acceptable – regrettable but certainly not villainous. Later, as the campaign unrolled, the story was supplemented with Arla in the role of hero: small dairies found a protective friend eager and willing to help with common initiatives, e.g. events like "the Cows' Dancing Day", the day in April when all the organic cows (by agreement) are let out into the pastures from their winter stables, common advertisement for organic milk etc. Finally, Arla positioned itself as the defender of Danish milk in Danish glasses, with the invention of a role that was not in the original story, viz. the brutal competition from Europe. The press accepted a large part of the story, possibly under influence of the detailed refutations that earlier, more sinister press stories had received on the Arla web, but certainly also because there were manifest initiatives to write about.

In terms of *voice*, Arla took a novel path. Handbooks in corporate communication regularly mention the importance of the corporation speaking with one voice (e.g. Fombrun and van Riel 2003). The corporation cannot survive a multitude of different voices saying different things: the persona simply shatters. But in Arla's case, the one-voice strategy was not interpreted as one spokesman, like the press officer. Rather, it was conceived as a chorus of different voices emanating from assorted managers, employees, producers, nutrition experts, and cooks; with such a multitude of individual opinions on subjects like milking by robot or faulty press reports of the sugar content in ready-made cocoa, the audience was likely to lose the sense of careful staging or orchestration.

The fact that no voice, at any time, produced an opinion that ran counter to the official new caring persona, is quite hard to remember. The threat that textbooks warn against is that of

internal dissent, where the audience has access to critical opinions about the corporation, coming from the inside, especially as shared on blogs (Ihator 2001). This situation damages credibility, and it was never an issue in the Arla campaign. If there was any dissent from the inside, it was *not* posted on the web or given vent in the press.

3.1. Attribution

Lastly, image restoration depends on what happened to the receivers' original *attribution* of responsibility. In this case I shall argue that the perception of responsibility, and hence guilt, probably did not change a great deal, but that all the other factors mentioned above served to make the original unethical act recede. In fact, there is another aspect of attribution theory that has even more explanatory value here, viz. that of the *fundamental attribution error*. Psychologists find as a very robust result that people judge responsibility differently depending on whether the event was triggered by a member of their in-group or an out-group, and the observation has been transferred e.g. to negotiation interaction, but not to public relations (for overview of attribution theory, see Ross and Nisbett 1991, Martinko 1995).

The standard attribution scheme hinges on the division between *personal* characteristics and *situational* factors. If A crashes his car, attribution of guilt will be influenced on whether he is known to drive too fast or known to be a very careful driver (history), and on whether other people crashed that night on that road because of snow, or it was a perfectly straightforward drive (distinctiveness). In the case of a reckless driver, people will be more prone to attribute the accident to his personal characteristics. In the case of a careful driver, conversely, they will be more likely to look for situational factors that could have created the accident. If it is known to be a dangerous spot, and the weather was bad, there is more likelihood that people will attribute the accident to situational factors; if no such excuse is present, they will attribute the accident to personal factors (unskilled driving). This is the basis for the insights about the public ascribing responsibility in Coombs and Holladay 2004, and Coombs 2007.

However, this tendency is overridden when people are personally involved. Members of their in-group, like family or friends, regularly benefit from the doubt. Thus the default

attribution, even in perfect weather conditions, will be to situational factors: we know that our friends are reasonable people, they really would not have driven recklessly, so there must be another explanation.

On the other hand, out-groups are suspect; the default attribution, even in heavy snow, is to personal characteristics. Thus we assume, without thinking about it, that people who differ from ourselves in some salient way are probably lousy drivers. This tendency to under-estimate situational factors in case of out-groups, and over-estimate them for in-groups, is known as the fundamental attribution error.

If attribution theory can serve to explain receiver reactions, surely this aspect is crucial, and should be added to the insights that Coombs and his colleagues draw on when they proclaim that the theory represents the next step after the case descriptions of post-crisis communication (Coombs 2007). It is arguable that what happened in Arla's image restoration campaign was that they succeeded in creating affinity or even identification with stakeholders. People who used the website or watched the commercials got to know them almost personally; instead of a faceless monopoly, we got a company who employed dairy farmers and product managers with Jutland accents and a sense of humour. The result was that the division between Arla and us-stakeholders-who-thought-Arla-unethical, and therefore out-group, was replaced. We came to think of the bloggers and cooks and farmers and their friends and colleagues as in-group. In retrospect, that meant that we no longer judged so harshly when we thought about the Hirtshals case: there were probably situational factors involved as well.

Corporate apologia, then, must be seen as a complex set of factors – a response that consists of several initiatives, some immediately after the crisis, and some that become appropriate over time, initiated by feedback from stakeholders. It is therefore almost always too simple to recommend one kind of response, even if a company wants to aim for the one-voice strategy. However, the image restoration can be left alone once the stakeholder response has stopped being salient, i.e. when they no longer think about the legitimacy issue. At that point, going on saying you are sorry will be counter-productive. With luck, the corporation will have learnt that having a history is a liability, and that it may be more cost-effective to be known for human kindness.

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