

**Current Crisis Event Application Paper: Penn State Child Abuse Scandal through News  
Framing Theory and Apologia**

Carmela Caracotche Picone

COST 386: Crisis Communication

Dr. Melisa McNelis

April 18th, 2025

## **Introduction**

In November of 2011, Penn State University was involved in a major scandal, due to accusations of child sexual abuse committed by Jerry Sandusky, an assistant coach for the Penn State football team (Adams, 2018). The crisis had multiple layers of corruption and cover-up, involving not only Sandusky, but also several Penn State administrators and the university's head football coach of the moment, Joe Paterno. The Penn State child sexual abuse scandal was one of the most impactful crises in the last decades. A crisis can be defined as a specific, unexpected, non-routine event or series of events that creates high levels of uncertainty and a significant or perceived threat to high priority goals (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013); and this scandal clearly exemplifies all these characteristics, profoundly affecting the institution while also offering powerful insight on crisis communication.

## **Penn State's Football Program**

Penn State's football program has always been known as an athletic program of excellence and success, having a fundamental role in the identity of the University and community. The program won two national championships, in 1982 and 1986, and also four Big Ten championships, in 1994, 2005, 2008, and 2016. All of these accomplishments (except for the 2016 Big Ten championship) were possible because of the coaching of head coach Joe Paterno and his assistant coach, Jerry Sandusky. Joe Paterno, worked as the head coach from 1966 to 2011. He even became the winningest coach in college football history with 409 victories. Sandusky joined Paterno in 1969, and held that position for 32 years, retiring in 1999 (Albino, 2013). Both coaches built a program of winning and success; making this program famous for its legacy, and acclaimed all over the country as one of the most important NCAA teams. In this

way, when the scandal broke in 2011 Penn State, it affected multiple stakeholders, since a lot of people were involved, such as administrators, coaches, students, alumnes, athletes, victims and fans.

### **Penn State child abuse scandal: a summary of the crisis**

Before analyzing the communication management of the crisis, it must be acknowledged how the crisis developed. The scandal clearly involves many years, important dates, multiple cover-ups, and the media coverage, but there are definitely some important dates and events to highlight within those years. In March 2011, Sara Ganim, a very known reporter who later won a Pulitzer Prize for her coverage, reported that Jerry Sandusky was under a grand jury investigation for the sexual assault of a boy. This was an old allegation, specifically from 2009. This investigation lasted for a year and a half and involved many figures from Penn State besides Jerry Sandusky, like Joe Paterno, Tim Curley (Penn State athletic director), Gary Schultz (Penn State vice president) and Graham Spanier (university president ). This reported abuse occurred while Sandusky volunteered as a high school football coach and was handled by school officials who closed the case rapidly. When this allegation took place, some other past allegations also resurfaced. Moreover, it reappeared a report made in 1998 in which Sandusky showered with an 11-year-old boy. The Penn State police and the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare investigated the incident at the moment, and the district attorney advised investigators that no charges will be filed, followed by the closure of the case instructed by the university police. (Ganim, 2011) Another important event that reappeared was that in March 2002, graduate assistant Mike McQueary told coach Joe Paterno that he had witnessed Sandusky sexually abusing a boy in the Lasch Building showers; which means that the coaching staff was aware of Sandusky's behaviors. After this, Paterno decided to report the incident to the Athletic Director,

Tim Curley, and McQueary testified to him that he had seen Sandusky engaging in an abusive act with a kid. After all these allegations resurfaced, on November 5, 2011, Jerry Sandusky was arrested and subsequently released on \$100,000 bail after an arraignment on 40 criminal counts related to child molestation (ESPN.com news services, 2011). On the same day, Tim Curley and Gary Schultz were charged with perjury and also failure to report what they knew of the allegations. Months later, on June 22, 2012, Jerry Sandusky was found guilty of sexually abusing 10 boys between 1995 and 2009. He was sentenced to 30 to 60 years in prison. Years later, on March 24, 2017, three important figures of the cover-up of the scandal were also found guilty. Graham Spanier was sentenced to 4 to 12 months, with the first two months to be served in jail and the remainder under house arrest. Tim Curley received 7 to 23 months, including three months in jail, while Gary Schultz was sentenced to 6 to 23 months, with two months in jail. All of these sentences reflected the court's recognition of their roles in failing to act against Sandusky's abusive behavior, due to substantial evidence that Penn State officials conspired to conceal Sandusky's numerous crimes (Lane, 2014).

### **Analyzing the scandal through Apologia**

The severity and impact of this crisis led scholars to study it as a major crisis communication event, allowing for the application of various crisis communication theories. One such theory is apologia, which seeks to study the tactical responses that individuals and organizations can use when their actions are seen as violating commonly accepted public values (Hearit, 2006). In other words, it analyzes the possible restoration of the organization's damaged images through compelling and persuasive defense; being applied to cases in which ethics are involved, as it happens in the Penn State Scandal. Apologia is known as a defense speech, where the accused responds to the charges brought against them. To do so, Sellnow and Seeger (2013)

highlight mainly two types of strategies. On the one hand, reformative strategies are a type of strategy that seeks to maintain or regain the speaker's credibility, but without trying to change the audience's perception or meaning of the elements involved. Within this type of strategy, denial and bolstering can be analyzed. Denial is denying allegations or shifting blame by showing no participation at all in the event. Bolstering is an alienation of themselves with favorable attitudes or values. On the other hand, there are transformative strategies; this type of strategy attempts to alter the meaning the audience has attached to the circumstances surrounding the situation. Within this type of strategy, differentiation and transcendence can be analyzed. Differentiation is separating the fact from a larger context, so as the audience can view the attribute. Transcendence involves joining facts, sentiments, objects or relationships with a larger context so as the audience does not presently view the attribute.

Given this crisis, this theory can definitely explain the rhetorical strategies employed by Penn State University and its key figures in their attempts to manage public perception and restore credibility. When analyzing the crisis communication messages crafted and released by the people involved and also the institution, the different types of strategies proposed by Apologia were implemented. To begin with, Sandusky's claims were and still are from a reformative strategies perspective. He implements both denial and bolstering, trying to create distance between himself and the idea of him as an abuser. For instance, right after he was assigned a minimum sentence of 30 years he stated the following "I see my throwing thousands of kids up in the air, hundreds of water balloon battles, happy times, people laughing with us. I see kids laughing and playing, and I see a lovable dog licking their face." In this case, he implemented bolstering; Sandusky is aligning himself with favorable attitudes. Years later, he still held a position of reformative strategy, through statements such as "I never ever in my life

ever thought about molesting anybody”. This statement is a clear example of denial; showing no connection at all with the event. Analyzing Penn State University’s position, their first response to the jury’s report was “The focus of all of our actions going forward will be on driving a culture of honesty, integrity, responsible leadership and accountability at all levels and within all units of our institution” (Progress, 2012). This statement is an example of transcendence. Instead of directly talking about the issue, Penn State focuses toward future actions and values such as honesty, integrity, responsible leadership, and accountability. Another interesting statement made by the university was after Joe Paterno’s death, which was on January 22nd, 2012; considering the context, this death was in the middle of all the scandal, and meant “We grieve for the loss of Joe Paterno, a great man who made us a greater university. His dedication to ensuring his players were successful both on the field and in life is legendary and his commitment to education is unmatched in college football. His life, work and generosity will be remembered always. [...] We are all deeply saddened. [...]” (Progress, 2012) . This statement strategically frames his legacy in a positive way despite the scandal, which is a transcendence strategy; attempting to shift the audience’s perception of the event by associating it with a broader, more favorable context.

### **News framing theory for a deeper understanding of the crisis**

In addition to apologia, another theory that can be extensively applied to this crisis is the news framing theory. The term framing is defined by Gamson and Modigliani (1989) as a way of examining how the portrayal that the news presents affects the public’s perception of events. In other words, this theory is a study focused primarily on the way organizations are portrayed by the news media following a crisis. Different framings influence how people think about those issues; affecting both the perception and the information processing of diverse events. News Framing Theory offers four main elements within the communication process that are central to

framing analysis: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture (Zaklama, 2025). The first element is the communicator, most of the time, journalists. The communicator definitely plays a critical role in building and shaping the news; their choices in different use of language, quotations, and presentation of the information shape how the news are presented. The text is another important element; the text itself involves different words, structures, sentences and most important, all the information. Different presentations of the information mean different analysis and interpretations. The third element is the receiver, in other words, the audience. Every single person has a unique interpretation of the same information presented, based on their beliefs, experiences, and backgrounds. Finally, the fourth element is culture; the common beliefs and ideas that social groups hold. News Framing Theory also proposes framing devices; different narrative techniques used to portray stories. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) identify five framing devices that condense information and create different types of frames. They identify (1) metaphors, (2) exemplars, (3) catch- phrases, (4) depictions, and (5) visual images as framing devices. These devices help consolidate a variety of portrayals, and consequently, multiple interpretations and perceptions of stories.

The Penn State child abuse scandal is a clear application of how the way a situation is framed has a direct impact on how audiences perceive it. Firstly, we can apply and expand the four elements central to framing analysis; the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. The communicators, or journalists, were pivotal to the framing of the scandal. One key figure was Sara Ganim, who reported for The Patriot-News; she led the investigation and was the first to bring attention to the scandal. Secondly, the text; this element varied significantly depending on the communicator, the media outlet, and the framing devices used. For example, the use of metaphors like "monster" to describe Sandusky, or catch-phrases such as "The

Downfall of a Legend” when referring to Joe Paterno, helped emphasize certain emotional and moral frames; considering that these devices are not merely objective facts, but more of subjective appreciations made by the communicator. Thirdly, the receiver, that is to say, the audience. Differences in the audience's beliefs and backgrounds affect how news is processed; people who were more deeply involved with football were still in favor of the coaches, whereas people external from the community were against them. Finally, the culture, which is deeply linked to the audience. In this case, Penn State Football was a major part of the school’s identity, which made the scandal seen not just as a legal issue, but as something that was affecting the values of the institution.

Gómez-Zará, Boon, & Birnbaum (2018) explain some of the most used frames, which include agents depicted as heroes, villains, or victims, so that readers can more easily anticipate and comprehend the attitudes, beliefs, decisions, and actions of these agents as characters. The framing of the scandal created mainly two important and distinctive frames; Sandusky as a villain, and Paterno as a hero. Frames tend to use positive terms to describe heroes, and negative terms for victims and villains. Most of the time heroes embody courage, outstanding achievements and noble qualities, whereas villains embody evil intentions, plotting, and other negative qualities. This created a different reaction in the public, based on the framing provided by the media, there was a polarized public reaction. On one hand, many people stood firmly against Penn State and Sandusky, since the frames depicted them as “the villain”; they showed their ideas through protests and signs such as “Rights over football”, “To the victims: I apologize for Penn State,” and “They all knew, all of them.” On the other side, surprisingly, a large number of fans, athletes, and alumni defended Joe Paterno, who was still depicted as a hero; they responded with messages like “Joe Paterno is still my hero,” “Proud to support Penn State

Football,” and “We are still Penn State.” This illustrates how the framing of individuals as heroes or villains can powerfully influence public opinion, even when both figures had clearly failed to act ethically.

Another very important frame to analyze is ESPN’s work. Considering that ESPN is one of the largest cable networks in the United States, and that they secured the rights to the College Football Playoff, making it the exclusive broadcaster of the championship games, they were heavy influencers on the framing of the scandal. Their framing had a particularly deep connection to morality that emphasized the unethical behavior from Sandusky, but also put a lot of pressure on Penn State as an entity. Some examples of news coverage titles include “Penn State scandal key players”, “Penn State statement on Sandusky verdict”, and “ Gary Schultz, Tim Curley arraigned”. This frame exposes the failings of Penn State officials on addressing the problem, and, of course, shows the unacceptance towards Sandusky’s actions. This frame shows a broader picture of Penn State as an entity that is part of a larger moral failing. ESPN was probably the most legitimate source of sports news during the scandal, emphasizing the ethical failings of university officials and Sandusky’s actions, ultimately influencing how both the victims and the institution were perceived.

## **Conclusion**

The Penn State child abuse scandal was a major crisis that the institution overcame; it exposed multiple failures from the University, and that’s why it’s a powerful case study to analyze. Through the application of apologia theory, it can be analyzed through a theoretical framework which type of defensive speeches were used by individual figures such as Sandusky and Paterno, but also the institution as a whole. Moreover, news framing theory reveals the

critical role of the media in shaping public understanding of the crisis. Media outlets, particularly ESPN, framed the scandal in a specific way that influenced public opinion. By examining this case through both apologia and news framing theories, we gain a more comprehensive understanding on how this crisis took place.

## References

- Adams, K. J. (2018). *Heroes and villains: A cultural analysis of the 2011 Penn State football child abuse scandal* (Honors thesis, Bucknell University). Bucknell Digital Commons. [https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/honors\\_theses/432](https://digitalcommons.bucknell.edu/honors_theses/432)
- Albino, J. (2013). Personal leadership identity and leadership frames: Understanding what happened at Penn State. *The Psychologist-Manager Journal*, 16(3), 131–146. <https://doi.org/10.1037/mgr0000004>
- ESPN.com news services. (2011, November 9). Sandusky, Penn State case timeline. *ESPN.com*. Retrieved from [http://espn.go.com/college-football/story/\\_/id/7212054/key-dates-penn-state-nittany-lions-sex-abuse-cas](http://espn.go.com/college-football/story/_/id/7212054/key-dates-penn-state-nittany-lions-sex-abuse-cas)
- Gamson, W. A., & Modigliani, A. (1989). Media Discourse and Public Opinion on Nuclear Power: A Constructionist Approach. *American Journal of Sociology*, 95(1), 1–37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2780405>
- Ganim, S. (2011, March 31). Jerry Sandusky, former Penn State staffer, subject of grand jury investigation. *The Patriot-News*. Retrieved from [http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2011/03/jerry\\_sandusky\\_former\\_penn\\_st.html](http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2011/03/jerry_sandusky_former_penn_st.html)
- Gomez-Zara, D., Boon, M., & Birnbaum, L. (2018, March). Who is the hero, the villain, and the victim? detection of roles in news articles using natural language techniques. In *Proceedings of the 23rd International Conference on Intelligent User Interfaces* (pp. 311-315).

Hearit, K. M. (2006). *Crisis management by apology : corporate responses to allegations of wrongdoing* (1st ed.). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lane, M. G. (2014). *Penn State football: An analysis of crisis communication best practices and how PSU overcame the ultimate PR crisis* (Honors Capstone Project). Syracuse University. [https://surface.syr.edu/honors\\_capstone/903](https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/903)

Progress. (2011, 2012, 2013, 2014). *Penn State Progress Website*. Retrieved from <http://www.progress.psu.edu/progress>

Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2013). *Theorizing crisis communication*. Wiley-Blackwell.

Zaklama, S. (2025, February 14). Exploring the foundations of media framing theory. *European Modern Studies Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.59573/>