From Hoax as Crisis to Crisis as Hoax: Fake News and Information Disorder as Disruptions to the Discourse of Renewal

Timothy L. Sellnow (iD), Adam Parrish, and Lauren Semenas

Nicholson School of Communication and Media, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida, USA

ABSTRACT
Hoaxes have long been a reputational threat to organizations. For example, false claims that syringes had been found in bottles of Pepsi-Cola products, that a portion of a finger had been found in Wendy's chili, and that Domino's employees had intentionally served contaminated food to customers have topped the media's agenda. More recently, the hoax phenomenon has been tactically reversed. Heavily trafficked Internet sites and controversial television personalities frequently argue that well-documented crises themselves are hoaxes. The potential for claims of crisis as hoax to disrupt the discourse of crisis renewal is examined through an analysis of three cases. We argue that overcoming such disruptions requires corporate social responsibility, a focus on the issues rather than the hoaxers, and continued efforts to improve media literacy for all audiences.

KEYWORDS: Crisis communication; risk communication; hoax; disinformation; fake news; crisis actor

False claims insisting that syringes had been found in bottles of Pepsi-Cola products (Weiner, 2006), that a portion of a finger had been found in Wendy's chili (Burbank, 2006), and that Domino's employees had intentionally served contaminated food to customers (Clifford, 2009) are examples of recent hoaxes creating reputational crises. All of these cases demanded an immediate, highly visible response. Previous research has broadly defined hoaxes as false claims made deliberately to appear as true (Kumar, West, & Leskovec, 2016). In the past, these hoaxes have focused mainly on attacking the reputation of organizations and government agencies (Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012). Although false, hoaxes that draw attention from stakeholders, such as consumers,

demand a response, typically in the form of denial. More recently, hoaxes taking an inverse approach have appeared. Heavily trafficked Internet sites, such as InfoWars, have routinely distributed claims that some well-documented crises themselves are hoaxes. For example, conspiracy theorists have claimed that tragedies such as the Sandy Hook shooting were faked, that the Las Vegas shooting was accomplished by multiple gunmen, and that the students speaking out after the shooting in Parkland, Florida, along with the young immigrant children in tears after being separated from their parents at the Texas border were crisis actors (Criss, 2018; Rosenberg, 2018). Such claims of crises being hoaxes have become "common occurrences in the wake of national tragedy" (Snider, 2018, para. 3).

In this analysis, hoax claims that retrospectively challenge the existence of crises are referred to as *crisis denial*. Crisis denial is defined operationally as claims challenging the authenticity of widely viewed crises by depicting them as hoaxes. Although crisis denials may in many cases seem preposterous, they do create demands on the time and resources of organizations, agencies, and individuals attempting to respond to, recover from, and heal after tragedy. Moreover, these crisis denial claims can energize oppositional forces that resist policy changes inspired by the lessons learned from crisis events (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). In doing so, we argue that crisis denial disrupts and delays the discourse of renewal. Renewal discourse inspires a prospective vision for ethical change based on the lessons learned from a crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2018). Disrupting this process delays positive change and prolongs the suffering of those victimized by the crisis. Thus analyzing the role crisis denial plays in disrupting the renewal process and exploring options for minimizing such disruptions is warranted. This study reviews the discourse of renewal and the potential for its disruption or delay through information disorder. Information disorder in these cases can be created by denial claims portraying well-documented crises as hoaxes and the victims of these tragedies as inauthentic. We begin by reviewing the literature focusing on renewal discourse and the information disorder created by hoaxes. We then analyze three recent cases of crisis denial. We end with conclusions and implications, focusing on the challenges and potential solutions revealed in analysis.

Discourse of Renewal

The discourse of renewal's focus on discovering opportunities for positive change in response to crises is a departure from much of the research in crisis communication (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002). This theory has been applied in a wide variety of contexts, such as ruinous fires (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002), deadly product failures (Reierson, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2009), terrorist attacks (Seeger, Ulmer, Novak, & Sellnow, 2005), sexual abuse scandals (Maier & Crist, 2017), and school shootings (Littlefield, Reierson, Cowden, Stowman, & Long Feather, 2009). The novel perspective of renewal discourse is based on two foundational principles. First is that crises serve an epistemic function by revealing failures in organizations, agencies, and communities, some of which are subtle and overlooked, others clearly evident and ignored prior to the crisis. Crises bring these failures, subtle or obvious, to the forefront, creating an exigence for change (Seeger & Griffin Padgett, 2010). Thus organizational renewal is distinct from other forms of organizational change that are based on subtler pressures. Second, a discourse of renewal is based on the assumption that organizations can and do act intentionally to change their internal functions and their surroundings. These actions are established and supported through a discourse based on good reasons for change. Lessons learned are garnered from the crisis and formed into a prospective vision for ethical change that is articulated to those who can enact the change through well-reasoned rhetorical exchange (Ulmer et al., 2018). The attention generated by the crisis typically creates a broad and attentive audience for the renewal discourse.

Four components are central to establishing a discourse of renewal (Ulmer et al., 2018). First, renewal is based on organizational learning. The changes advocated in the discourse must be based on the lessons learned through postcrisis reflection. Through the learning process, risks that were overlooked or ignored are identified, and recommendations for changes needed to address those risks are made. Second, renewal discourse is value based. For example, were some values of the organization or community violated by the actions preceding the crisis? Pursuing profit over safety is an example of distorted values. Third,

renewal discourse demands a prospective vision. To meet the demands of prospective vision, the organization or community must stress opportunities for moving forward and improving based on the lessons learned from the crisis. A prospective vision contrasts sharply with a retrospective vision, where postcrisis discussion is snarled in litigation and blame. Finally, renewal discourse is based on a rhetoric of good reasons for change that are established by leaders in the postcrisis effort. These leaders may be formally established, emergent, or both. Established leaders are often heads of organizations or elected officials. Emergent leaders are often victims of the crisis who step forward to advocate for their fellow citizens. In some crises, both established and emergent leaders simultaneously advocate for change (Ulmer et al., 2018).

Much of the research on renewal discourse has noted only limited controversy in the changes proposed in response to crises. The need for change in many of the cases analyzed is clear, and the audience actually demands that the changes occur. The changes are lauded, and little or no resistance occurs. Thus this analysis expands our understanding of renewal discourse by focusing on the potential for the prospective vision for change initiated in response to the crisis to be disrupted by opposing voices—in this case, crisis denial and distortion through claims that the crisis is a hoax.

Hoaxes

Although hoaxes attacking an organization's reputation have received considerable attention from strategic communication scholars (Cheng & Cameron, 2018; Hearit, 2006; Ulmer et al., 2018; Veil, Sellnow, & Petrun, 2012; Weiner, 2006), less is known about hoaxes claiming the crises themselves either did not occur or did not occur in the manner described by government and media sources. In this section, we distinguish between hoaxes as crises and crises as hoaxes.

Hoaxes as crises. Historically, hoaxes were typically seen as singular attacks on specific organizations or structures. Hoaxers used false claims of organizational misdeeds or failings to tarnish the organization's reputation. Although companies know that the claims are false from their inception, the broad distribution of the hoax messages requires

a substantial crisis response (Veil et al., 2012). Even after providing evidence refuting the hoax claims, lingering concerns from some of the afflicted organization's publics can linger. By contrast, hoax claims in the form of bomb threats have also frequently disrupted businesses, schools, and government administration. In these cases, however, normality is restored after evacuations, searches, and an all-clear recommendation. Although these hoaxes are distracting and exact a financial toll, they are often quickly resolved (Bowman, 2004).

Crises as hoaxes. Although the strategic communication process of identifying hoax attacks as false claims and systematically disproving them is well established in the literature (Sellnow, Littlefield, Vidoloff, & Webb, 2009), much less is known about responding to false claims that portray actual crisis events, where observable damage is done and lives are lost, as hoaxes. In other words, strategic communication research is geared almost entirely toward fending off hoax attacks that threaten an organization's reputation. Conversely, false claims propagated by conspiracy theorists create an entirely new strategic communication challenge by taking the opposite position and claiming that bona fide crisis events and their victims are themselves a hoax. Conspiracy theorists have, for example, claimed that the Holocaust did not occur, the lunar landings were faked, the HIV/AIDS virus was created by the CIA, and the 9/11 Commission concealed evidence ("Conspiracy Theories," n.d.). More recently, hoax claims have been promulgated by conspiracy theorists questioning the existence of school shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, and the veracity of the survivors of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida (Yglesias, 2018).

Hoaxes as information disorder. Considerable discussion currently focuses on *fake news*, defined as the broad distribution of "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017, p. 214). High exposure to such falsified news articles combined with low exposure to hard news or verifiable journalism contributes to perceptions that fake news is real (Balmas, 2014). Distributing such falsified accounts is often linked to a political objective, such as the defamation of one political candidate or policy in an effort to secure favor for an opposing candidate or policy. Hoax claims, by their nature,

are intentionally and verifiably false. Moreover, such claims lack impact unless they are strategically distributed to broad audiences. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argued, however, that claims such as those discussed in this analysis are better characterized as information disorder. We contend that hoax claims that deny well-documented crises create a level of information disorder that can disrupt the discourse of renewal.

Information disorder broadly encompasses "rumours, conspiracy theories and fabricated information" that, through digital connectivity, are broadly distributed and noticed due to their "shock value" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 10). Wardle and Derakhshan argued that the term *fake news* lacks precision because it conflates multiple forms of fabricated information. Alternatively, the term *information disorder* serves as an umbrella term for disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. *Misinformation* makes false connections among facts and individuals but is not necessarily created to cause harm. Rumors or misinterpretation of facts are examples of misinformation. *Malinformation* differs in that it uses leaks, harassment, and hate speech with the intent of inflicting harm. Unlawfully obtaining e-mails from a political candidate and publicly sharing them or other information out of context is an example of malinformation. *Disinformation* includes elements of both misformation and malinformation. Specifically, disinformation features false contexts, imposter content, and content that is manipulated or fabricated. High-profile hoaxes designed to influence perception or to disrupt business are examples of disinformation (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The capacity to share information at an "unprecedented speed and breadth" has manifested a "dark side" where disinformation "conceived in order to deliberately deceive or betray an audience" can be distributed with ease and broad impact (Kumar, West, & Leskovec, 2016, p. 591). Users of social media are often deceived into spreading disinformation through their online social networks (Tambuscio, Ruffo, Flammini, & Menczer, 2015). Thus advances in communication technology have intensified the spread of disinformation.

In short, disinformation is produced in a format intended for broad distribution and redistribution. Audiences then interpret the messages and respond or fail to respond according to the message content. When

these messages are designed to deny well-documented crisis events, the information disorder they manifest has the potential to disrupt the discourse of renewal. Thus changes designed to avoid similar crises and opportunities for survivors of the crisis to heal can be delayed or prevented.

Case Analysis

Crisis denial often occurs even while the details of the crisis event are unknown, continues by disputing facts as they are revealed, and can form a divergence in the crisis narrative that lingers for years (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016). We provide three cases that reveal the form and function of crisis denial as information disorder causing disruption in the renewal process. This analysis applies the case study method to a recent set of cases exemplifying consistent strategies of crisis denial. In a 7-month period from February 2018 through August 2018, attempts to portray three well-established crises as hoaxes were widely featured in the national media. These cases include the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; the video and photographic evidence of the emotional turmoil experienced by children of illegal immigrants separated from their families; and the peak of Alex Jones's long-standing claims that the Sandy Hook school shooting was staged. The same strategy of claiming that crisis actors were used to create or publicize the three crises was central in each case. The consistency of the time period and the claims made in each of these cases make them a viable set for analyzing the interaction between crisis denial and the renewal process.

An etic approach was used to analyze the three cases because renewal theory and the components of information disorder were clearly documented in existing literature. An etic analysis is informed by "conceptual categories provided by our disciplinary knowledge and theory" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 95). Furthermore, Yin (2018) explained that case analyses can function as explanation building about "how" or "why" a "presumed set of causal sequences" (p. 179) function in given circumstances. For this study, the cases identified provide explanation for how hoax claims interact with or detract from the discourse of renewal

following a crisis. Yin explains that, ideally, these explanations "reflect some rhetorically significant propositions" or "critical insights" (p. 179).

This analysis views three similar cases through the combined lenses of information disorder and the discourse of renewal. Our objective is to extend the current understanding of renewal discourse by including the potential disruption caused by information disorder, particularly in the form of hoax claims. The cases provided here are three distinct examples of a consistent strategy employed to deny the veracity of claims made about crisis events. Each consistently makes claims that victims of crises featured in media coverage are crisis actors.

Evidence for each case is drawn from multiple print media sources providing consistent reporting of the statements made by the speakers featured in each of the three cases. Yin (2018) explained that "the phenomenon of interest may pertain to a behavioral or social event, with the converged finding implicitly assuming a *single reality*" (p. 129). Given our focus on the actual statements made by the speakers, our data set meets this expectation. In the Parkland case, the actual e-mail sent by the primary communicator was captured and shared through multiple print publications. For the immigrant children case, video evidence was also available to confirm the exact words used by the primary speaker. Finally, in the Alex Jones case, his statements were verified in videos, some of which have now been removed from YouTube and other public platforms.

Immigrant Children as Crisis Actors

In June 2018, stories supported by emotionally charged photographs of young children in tears traumatized by being separated from their parents who were arrested as illegal immigrants resulted in 67% of Americans viewing the policy as unacceptable (CBS News, 2018). The separations increased dramatically in frequency and duration due to a policy shift by the Trump administration. The issue was quickly politicized, resulting in Democrats and some Republicans demanding the children be reunited with their parents. Conservative author and commentator Ann Coulter introduced a hoax claim into deliberation of the issue by labeling the children in the photographs "crisis actors." In a segment on *Fox News*, Coulter said, "These child actors weeping

and crying on all the other networks 24/7 right now; do not fall for it, Mr. President. . . . I get very nervous about the president getting his news from TV" (Rosenberg, 2018, para. 4). She further elaborated her claim by contending, "These kids are being coached. . . . They're given scripts to read by liberals. . . . Don't fall for the actor children" (para. 11).

Coulter insisted that her claims were supported by a report in the *New Yorker*, however, she initially offered no specifics about the story to which she was referring. After being pressured to clarify her attribution to the *New Yorker*, Coulter referred reporters to a 2011 story written by Suketu Mehta, a New York University professor. Mehta's *New Yorker* article told the story of an African woman seeking asylum in the United States. When asked about Coulter's interpretation of his story, Mehta remarked, "Either she lied or she's truly illiterate. . . . I was really shocked to see she is using my *New Yorker* piece, which has no child actors, no liberals toting scripts to be read by child actors" (Porter, 2018, paras. 8–9).

Public outcry over the separation of children from their families led President Trump to issue an executive order halting the practice shortly after Coulter made her comments. At the time of the executive order, more than 2,000 children separated from their parents in the previous 2 months were still not reunited (Reilly, 2018).

Ultimately, Coulter's claims sought to influence the voice of leadership in the renewal process in response to public outcry about the separation of children and parents in the immigration crisis. Her direct message to the president of the United States from the desk of the *Fox News* program sought to alter or influence his rhetorical response. Coulter's comments also conflicted with values of family that are paramount in both the crisis and the potential renewal process.

Parkland Students as Crisis Actors

On February 14, 2018, 17 students were shot and killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, by a former student (Madan, Rodriguez, Harris, & Vassolo, 2018). The tragedy of the event inspired an outpouring of sympathy for the families impacted by the crisis and fueled the ongoing debate about gun control in the United States. Students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas immediately began

speaking out in the wake of the tragedy, calling for reform aimed at diminishing gun violence. Within hours of their appearance in local and national media, opponents of gun control responded by labeling the students "crisis actors."

Perhaps the most notable accusation that the Stoneman Douglas High School students were crisis actors came from Benjamin Kelly, district secretary for Florida state representative Shawn Harrison. Kelly sent an e-mail to a *Tampa Bay Times* reporter who had written a story including remarks from two outspoken Marjory Stoneman Douglas students, Emma Gonzalez and David Hogg. The two students had been critical of the National Rifle Association and existing firearm laws in a CNN interview. Kelly wrote that Gonzalez and Hogg "are not students here but actors that travel to various crisis [*sic*] when they happen" (Eltagouri, 2018, para. 5). The message was sent from his official work e-mail address. When the *Tampa Bay Times* contacted Kelly and asked him what support he could offer for his claims, he referred them to a YouTube conspiracy video that has since been removed (Leary & Wilson, 2018). The video claimed to show evidence that Hogg had appeared as a crisis actor for other crisis events (Eltagouri, 2018).

Once Kelly's role in propagating the claim that the emotional commentary shared by Gonzalez and Hogg was part of a hoax was revealed, he was sternly criticized and swiftly fired by Florida House speaker Richard Corcoran, who oversees all House employees. Corcoran announced, "On behalf of the entire Florida House, I sincerely apologize to the students targeted and again commend them for their courage through this unspeakable tragedy" (Leary & Wilson, 2018, para. 11). Florida senator Marco Rubio joined Corcoran in criticizing Kelly and others who claimed the Parkland students were part of a hoax. Rubio tweeted, "Claiming some of the students on tv after #Parkland are actors is the work of a disgusting group of idiots with no sense of decency" (@marcorubio). Despite the condemnation of Kelly's claims that the students were part of a hoax, such claims continued in posts by conservatives on social media. These posts articulated "absurd conspiracy theories that kids who just endured a horrifying assault are actually 'crisis actors' trained to stage 'false flag' events" (Rabin, 2018, para. 2).

Undeterred, the Parkland students continued their efforts to inspire

activism by demanding stronger gun control legislation. They organized a rally near Florida's capitol a week after the shooting in their high school. In support of the Parkland survivors, students across Florida joined in school walkouts as a protest against gun violence and a call for gun control legislation. The students then shifted their efforts to organize a March for Our Lives event that drew hundreds of thousands of young people to Washington, DC, in a unified call for gun control legislation (Gurney & Irby, 2018). They followed this initiative with a summer tour in 2018 to approximately 20 U.S. cities and every voting district in Florida. The goal of the tour was to "register young voters and promote gun law changes" (Madan & Wright, 2018, para. 1).

Kelley's claims momentarily disrupted the opportunity to acquire the information needed from those victimized by the crisis to establish lessons learned. Rather than focusing on identifying and learning from the failures preceding the Parkland attack, school officials and the victims themselves were forced to deny the hoax claims by asserting the obvious—Gonzalez and Hogg were indeed Parkland students.

Sandy Hook's Grieving Parents as Crisis Actors

The 2012 Sandy Hook school shooting by a single gunman resulted in the deaths of 6 faculty and staff and 20 young children. The fact that so many children, some as young as 6 years old, were violently killed generated alarm and an extensive national discussion of gun control measures. Despite widespread public support for legislation banning some firearms and gun clips holding a large volume of bullets following the Sandy Hook crisis, the legislation was defeated in the U.S. Senate (Ray, 2018). Further disheartening for families touched by the Sandy Hook tragedy and their sympathizers were the discordant voices of conspiracy theorists claiming that the Sandy Hook crisis was a hoax. None were more strident, persistent, and pervasive than Alex Jones.

Within weeks after the shooting, prominent conspiracy theorist Alex Jones began broadcasting claims through his radio program and YouTube channel, InfoWars, that the Sandy Hook school shooting was a hoax. Jones claimed that the Sandy Hook tragedy was a false flag event created by the U.S. government using crisis actors to influence gun control legislation. For example, his video *Why People Think Sandy*

Hook Is a Hoax was posted on January 27, 2013, approximately 6 weeks after the shooting. This video is no longer available due to the account associated with it having been terminated by YouTube. His InfoWars videos elaborating on his claims that Sandy Hook was a hoax staged by "crisis actors" were viewed millions of times (Williamson, 2018b, para. 3).

Jones is a well-known conspiracy theorist. Using a talk show format featuring conspiracy theories ranging from Satanists taking over America to the government controlling the weather, Jones has built an audience of nearly 2 million subscribers (Killelea, 2017). His annual income from product sales, advertising, and subscription videos was, at its peak, estimated at $10 million per year (Brown, 2017). Jones's popularity inspired then candidate Donald Trump to appear on his InfoWars program prior to the election in 2016. After the election, Trump called Jones, thanking him for his support (Killelea, 2017). Jones claimed in his YouTube videos to have indisputable evidence that the Sandy Hook crisis was a hoax. Over a 5-year span, Jones interviewed guests who claimed Sandy Hook could not have happened as reported. He built his argument claiming that the parents, children, and police officers responding to the shooting were actually crisis actors. Jones identified these individuals by name, ridiculing them on his programs.

These claims resonated with Jones's listeners and viewers. Court documents in a lawsuit filed against Jones noted that, as a result of his hoax claims that the crisis was, in his words, "synthetic, completely fake with actors, in my view, manufactured" and "families of the Sandy Hook victims have been stalked, threatened and subjected to online abuse by Mr. Jones's followers" (Williamson, 2018a, para. 8). The parents of a child killed in the Sandy Hook shooting were forced to move to a different home seven times due to harassment from Jones's followers after Jones criticized them by name on his broadcasts. Other families grieving the loss of their children in the shooting were subjected to "harassment, death threats, and personal attacks on social media" due to Jones's claims ("Parents of Jewish," 2018, para. 6). After being trolled viciously for years on social media by Jones's followers, another grieving parent from Sandy Hook, Nelba Márquez-Greene, voiced her concern about a lack of action to stop the harassment. Márquez-Greene

observed, "It feels like Facebook is waiting for someone to die before something gets done" (as cited in Collins, 2018, para. 4).

In fall 2018, social media leaders YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter deemed that Jones had crossed the line of free speech and entered the forbidden category of hate speech. He was banned from all three platforms, and his videos and other content were removed. Several weeks after the ban, Jones's InfoWars website dropped from an average of 1.4 million daily visits to approximately half that number (Nicas, 2018). Jones's ability to market his products was also diminished when PayPal stopped processing payments for products marketed on InfoWars because Jones "violated their policies on promoting hate and violence" (InfoWars, 2018). Jones is also facing two defamation lawsuits against him filed by Sandy Hook parents. These lawsuits are moving through the courts despite Jones's attempts to have them dismissed as a violation of his right to free speech (Martinez, 2018).

For these parents and many sympathizers, Alex Jones's claims blocked the prospective message of renewal. Rather than moving forward toward a vision of resolution, Jones's claims encouraged the opposite—a backward focus on blame and doubt.

Although different in their duration, all of the examples described herein are based on a similar claim: the crises are, at least in part, hoaxes propagated by parties who want to sway public sentiment about controversial legislative issues. Those suffering from the crises are featured by agents propagating false claims that these victims are actually crisis actors who are complicit in creating the hoax.

Conclusions and Implications

As the preceding cases reveal, claiming the presence of crisis actors is an adaptable crisis denial strategy for various crisis stages and types. Coulter clouded the immigration issue at its peak with her claims, Kelly challenged the authenticity of firsthand witnesses in the Parkland crisis in the earliest stages, and Jones pushed sundry claims of crisis actors in the Sandy Hook tragedy for years after the crisis, only recently peaking in confrontation. Although Coulter, Kelly, and Jones may or may not have been the originators of these claims, each occupied a position of

visibility, allowing him or her to amplify the message to willing listeners.

At worst, the amplification of hoax claims disrupts the components essential for a discourse of renewal. Leadership, lessons learned, a prospective vision, and ethical decision-making are the essential components of renewal discourse. Coulter's appeal to the president to ignore the distraught children threatened to disengage the leadership needed for essential change. Essential lessons needed to resolve crises are also impeded by hoax claims. Kelly's disruption of the crisis recovery process momentarily threatened to stall learning about how the shooter accessed his weapons and how he was able to enter the school and elude an armed guard. Jones's relentless pursuit of his conspiracy theories about Sandy Hook suppressed the prospective vision needed for families to move forward after the crisis. Given the lack of proof provided by all three crisis deniers, the ethical integrity of their words is questionable. Thus hoax claims have the potential to confuse, disrupt, or even deny the crisis renewal process. Without renewal, crises can linger as divisive, disempowering, and depressing tragedies that remain unhealed for communities and countries.

At minimum, the disruption created by hoax claims delays or distracts the discourse of renewal. Community leaders, legislators, journalists, and others are at least momentarily distracted from communicating fact-based accounts of the crises, expressions of remorse, and a vision for recovery. Coulter's claims cast doubt on the events and required time for fact-checking. Legislators in Florida were distracted by Kelly's false claims—time was needed to briefly investigate his actions and formally remove him from his position. Jones's long-standing claims added a cruel distraction that extenuated the grief and likely extended recovery time for family members and the Newtown community. In effect, these claims, at least temporarily, create a burden of proof that otherwise would not exist. Time and resources that could be used by organizations to help facilitate the crisis coping process (see Jin, Liu, & Austin, 2014) are diverted to "prove" the obvious: Immigrant children are immigrant children, students witnessing a shooting in their school are students at their school, and children who died in a school shooting were born and did attend the school. Time lost in the renewal process creates an unnecessary extension of pain, delay in the

recovery from crises, and an overall coarsening of the renewal process.

More subtly, crisis denial has the capacity to create a diversion for community leaders and legislators that can shield them during the most intense moments of public outrage from discussions of potentially controversial change. Being able to engage in chastising conspiracy theorists allows public officials to participate in the conversation without actually engaging in the renewal process. Instead of talking about how to limit the problem through future policies, they can talk about how livid they are at seeing the insensitivity and inappropriateness of crisis deniers harassing victims. Such commentary is potentially rewarding to their images without risking the controversy of discussing legislation on such matters as gun control or immigration. Legislators in Florida, for example, were able to publicly denounce Kelly without establishing a prospective vision of renewal.

Implications

Much can be said about the potential for hoax claims to derail the renewal process. This vulnerability, however, does not create helplessness. Steps can be taken to achieve renewal in the wake of hoax claims. Corporate social responsibility is one means by which hoax claims can be confronted. Apple, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and PayPal have, for example, confronted Alex Jones and his InfoWars financial empire by denying him access to their platforms. After being denied access, Jones claimed, "The more I'm persecuted, the stronger I get" (Nicas, 2018, para. 2). Indeed, after he was removed from these platforms, his website did see a flurry of activity. This surge in interest has since steadily diminished. When agents attack or dehumanize innocent victims of crises through crisis denial, refusing such agents access to platforms needed to amplify their hoax claims constitutes corporate social responsibility and should be encouraged. The potential for organizations to take such actions in the future is bolstered by the fact that organizations initiating socially responsible actions on matters where the publics are highly engaged tend to see an increase in customer support and commitment (Kim & Lee, 2012). Hence visible actions to confront hoaxers can be both virtuous and a wise business move.

Hoax claims, in their most extreme cases, are not without legal

ramifications. Hoaxers who cross the line between free speech and defamation are subject to litigation. Alex Jones's pursuit of grieving Sandy Hook parents crossed this line by verbally attacking parents by name as well as broadcasting their home addresses to his supporters. That these parents' lawsuits against Jones are proceeding through the courts despite his legal protests suggests that hoaxers who attack victims can be sued for defamation.

The indirect advantage of shielding legislators from candidly discussing the context of a crisis can also be addressed. Citizens and journalists can and should recognize and respond to legislators who denounce hoaxers without actually discussing the issue at hand. After all, the prevalence of claims that crises are propagated by crisis actors is not the primary issue. In the cases analyzed for this study, the primary issues are immigration and gun violence. Public and political discourse must focus on the issues themselves for renewal to occur.

Finally, ongoing efforts to enhance the American population's ability to recognize false claims or fake news should continue. With improved media literacy, viewers can more readily identify and disregard hoax claims built on unsubstantiated assertions. Considerable research is under way to better understand how best to warn viewers of fabricated news. Social media platforms have also begun to respond through the development of a more sophisticated filtering system. All of these actions are warranted and should be encouraged.

Conclusion

Crisis deniers have the distinct ability to deny the fresh sense of purpose inspired by a discourse of renewal. Sadly, these denials shift public debate away from renewal and toward a self-serving diversion from finding long-term solutions to prevailing problems. Recognizing the potential for such claims to do harm, particularly to innocent victims, is a step in the right direction. Purveyors of elaborate, unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, denying everything from lunar landings to the shape of Earth, may have once seemed harmless or even entertaining (Sheridan, 2018). Those amplifying messages that deny the authenticity of well-documented crises, however, have the potential to disrupt personal and community-wide healing and to delay or derail the development of positive solutions to recurring crises.

Timothy L. Sellnow, PhD, is a professor and director of graduate studies in the Nicholson School of Communication and Media at the University of Central Florida. He teaches courses in risk communication, crisis communication, and communication theory. His research focuses on crisis response and planning as well as message design for instructional risk communication.

Adam J. Parrish, PhD, is a lecturer in the Nicholson School of Communication and Media at the University of Central Florida. He teaches courses in health communication, organizational communication, communication theory, and other subjects. Dr. Parrish's research focuses on risk communication and persuasive message design to promote men's health.

Lauren Semenas recently graduated with her bachelor's degree in advertising and public relations from the Nicholson School of Communication and Media at the University of Central Florida. She is currently employed as a public relations professional.

ORCID
Timothy L. Sellnow ⓘ http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5353-4629

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