

Emotional news framing affects public response to crises

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When organizational crises occur, such as plane crashes or automobile recalls, public relations practitioners develop strategies for substantive action and effective communication. Now, University of Missouri researchers have found that the way in which news coverage of a crisis is framed affects the public's emotional response toward the company involved.

Glen Cameron, the Maxine Wilson Gregory Chair in Journalism Research and professor of strategic communication at the University of Missouri School of Journalism, along with Hyo Kim of Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, studied the reactions of news readers when exposed to a story about a crisis. One group read an "anger-frame" story that blamed the organization for the crisis. Another group read a "sadness-frame" story that focused on the victims and how they were hurt by the crisis. Cameron and Kim found that those who read the "anger-frame" story read the news less closely and had more [negative attitudes](#) toward the company than those exposed to the "sadness-frame" story.

"The distinct emotions induced by different news frames influenced individuals' [information processing](#) and how they evaluated the corporation," Cameron said.

Cameron and Kim also found that a corporate response to a crisis that focuses on the relief and wellbeing of the victims tends to improve the public's perceptions of the corporation as compared to the message focusing on the law, justice, and punishment. This was the case regardless of how the initial news was framed (i.e., anger vs. sadness). Cameron says these findings illustrate the importance of controlling the message during a crisis.

"It is important for corporations to put on a [human face](#) during crises," Cameron said. "If a corporation can focus on the well-being of the victims and how

the corporation will improve following the crisis, they have a better chance of influencing "sadness-frame" [news coverage](#) as opposed to "anger-frame" coverage. If the news coverage remains "sadness-framed," public perception will stay more positive."

Cameron says this research is important, not to help corporations shirk responsibility, but rather to handle crisis situations in the best way possible.

"Crises are going to happen," Cameron said. "Unfortunately, planes will crash and there will be oil spills. This study helps to show how the public will react to different types of news coverage of crises, and subsequently, what the best ways are for corporations to handle any crises they may encounter."

This study was published in *Communications Research*.

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