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# **Corporate Public Apologies, or Capitalism in Other Words**

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MSc in Media and Communications

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**Dissertation submitted to the Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and Political Science, August 2014, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MSc in Media, Communication and Development. Supervised by Dr Sarah Cefai.**

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Published by Media@LSE, London School of Economics and Political Science ("LSE"), Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE. The LSE is a School of the University of London. It is a Charity and is incorporated in England as a company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act (Reg number 70527).

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# **Corporate Public Apologies, or Capitalism in Other Words**

**Nina M Chung**

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## **ABSTRACT**

After the oil spills and ethics scandals, big corporate public apologies have become a norm. They spark debates in rooms where business executives meet, all the way to online forums where consumers tweet their two cents. In the headlines, the apologies are often lauded as an admission of corporate guilt, or accused of being a cheap corporate ploy. They are also usually reported in the context of decreased trust in business and the increased power of the consumer vis-à-vis the corporation. Meanwhile, a separate debate goes on about the merits of capitalism – a system that depends on the success of corporate interests. Is there a connection between the drama of corporate apologies and the drama of capitalism? Apologies are known for rehabilitating social order. Which social order are corporate public apologies rehabilitating?

So far, research on apologies has focused primarily on their short-term effects on reputation and crisis communications. However, corporate interests play big cultural and economic roles in capitalist systems, necessitating far more critical investigation into what their apologies mean. This dissertation asks how corporate public apologies resist or reaffirm those corporate roles and their capitalist framework. It is situated in the field of media and communications, drawing upon cultural studies and political economy analytical approaches to answer this question. It is based empirically on interviews with managing and executive-level officers of multinational organizations across business, nonprofit, media and politics sectors, and discusses what drives companies to apologize. Finally, this dissertation concludes that, in the short term, corporate public apologies suggest resistance to capitalist ideals by downplaying corporate profits and emphasizing consumer demands. Deeper analysis, however, finds that they are underpinned by neoliberal assumptions that are unique to capitalist systems: that corporate reform is addressed at an individualized, not systemic, level; business remains the best route to the common good; and businesspeople are society's role models. Ultimately, this dissertation offers a case study for the way objects of communication reinforce dominant ideologies in society, even if they seem to do quite the opposite.

**There are these two young fish swimming along**

and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?'

And the two young fish swim on for a bit,  
and eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes,

'What the hell is water?'

- David Foster Wallace

## INTRODUCTION

Capitalism might be having a moment. Six years past the latest financial crisis and armed with new statistics about socioeconomic inequality worldwide, public and academic speculation has proliferated as to whether the rising tides of this economic system really lifts all boats. In early 2014, books for general audiences like *Flash Boys: A Wall Street Revolt* and *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* reinforced distrust of the creators of great wealth, and publicized the numbers on rising social and economic inequality (Piketty and Zucman, 2014; Saez and Zucman, 2014). In April of 2014, *The Guardian* suggested that 'Occupy was right: capitalism has failed the world' and quoted *Capital* author Thomas Piketty saying that 'the present situation cannot be sustained for much longer.'<sup>1</sup> Such headlines flag the failures and corrections of the system; as readers and editors know, they are controversial.<sup>2</sup>

So capitalism seems to be 'very much under siege,' an admission made jointly by Dominic Barton, the Global Managing Director of consulting firm McKinsey & Company, and Lady Lynn Forester de Rothschild, Chief Executive of private investment company E.L. Rothschild LLC (The Henry Jackson Initiative for Inclusive Capitalism, 2012: 4). They attributed current 'income inequality, large-scale corporate and financial scandals and the fraying of public trust in business, historically high and persistent unemployment and short-term approaches to managing and owning companies' to the 'excesses' of late capitalism (Inclusive Capitalism

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<sup>1</sup> Hussey, A. (2014, April 13). Occupy was right: capitalism has failed the world. *The Guardian*. London. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/apr/13/occupy-right-capitalism-failed-world-french-economist-thomas-piketty>.

<sup>2</sup> 'Capitalism' is here defined as 'an economic system in which investment in and ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange of wealth is made and maintained chiefly by private individuals or corporations, especially as contrasted to cooperatively or state-owned means of wealth' ('Capitalism').

Initiative, 2014). In May 2014, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Christine Lagarde opened a speech at a conference about capitalism with a mention of Marx, his pessimism toward extreme capitalism, and a question: ‘So is “inclusive capitalism” an oxymoron?’ (Lagarde, 2014).

Public and media attention paid to business activity is not new though, especially for corporations, which are the ‘dominant form of modern capitalist enterprises’ (Lull and Hinerman, 2005; McCracken, 1981; Wolff, 2012: 12).<sup>3</sup> Today, these corporate businesses often choose, or are demanded, to apologize to the public after a crisis – an oil spill or product defect, for example (Cohen and Samp, 2013; Salvador, Folger and Priesemuth, 2012). The event commands high levels of reporting in traditional media (i.e., print, TV, broadcast outlets) and via social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter). However, the discussion in both mainstream media and academic business journals rarely delve deeper than if an apology was real, authentic, or offensive. The question they leave unanswered is what the apology might say about the privileged corporate status in an overall capitalist logic. Are corporate public apologies the result of newly empowered consumers and converging public-private interests (Curtin and Gaither, 2005) – a part of the ‘revolution of capitalism’ (Volans, 2013)? Or are they props for the existing order – another ‘free pass’ for private interests (Sussman, 2012; Wolff, 2012: 23)? These questions are exaggerated opposites, but hint at the range of roles apologies might be playing. Sociologist Nicholas Tavuchis (1991) explains that apologies ‘recall and reaffirm allegiance to codes’ and social structures (13). This dissertation uses crucial perspectives in media and communications theory to ask if that structure is capitalism.

The field of media and communications has been long concerned with hierarchy, structure and power in society (Silverstone, 1999). On one hand, communications convey an idea from one person to another (Carey, 1989: 15; ‘Communications’). On the other, they are for that exact reason the ideal tool for conveying ideas that serve as facts about reality, which may or may not be fact, and which serve a specific agenda (Carey, 1989: 21; Livingstone, 2009; Silverstone, 2005; Wasko, Murdock and Sousa, 2011). Researchers in this field question and critically analyse how ideologies are disseminated through objects of communication. An approach called cultural studies treats communications as an aspect of culture, often asking how audiences reinterpret and recycle the messages they receive (Williams, 1980, 1981; Hall,

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<sup>3</sup> Interested readers can find a small sample of that diverse coverage here: The Huffington Post. Retrieved from <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/public-apologies>; McCartney, S. (2014, July 9). The Art of the Airline Apology. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://www.online.wsj.com>; Semler, A. (2014, July 3). Sorry about that! The art of the public apology. *BBC*. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.com>; Sorkin, A.R. (2014,

1980). The political economy approach often situates communications within the economy, asking how they justify and perpetuate social hierarchies (Fuchs and Mosco, 2012; Wasko et al., 2011). This dissertation applies both approaches to explore if and/or how corporate public apologies convey a pro-capitalist ideology.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of apologies falls under many umbrellas. Psychiatrist Aaron Lazare (2004) has found that personal ‘how-to’ apology books have been on the rise since the early 1990s, followed by analysis in the law and medical professions (7). Public apologies have also enjoyed sociological and linguistic attention, with scholars analysing the structural and rhetorical aspects of apologies that leaders in the corporate world and international arena employ (Boyd, 2011; Cohen and Samp, 2013; Hill and Boyd, 2013; Kampf and Lowenheim, 2012; Lind, 2008). Within business management studies the ‘apology phenomenon’ has been studied with regards to corporate communications practices (Ballentine and Grubman, 2014; Coombs, 2013; Grebe, 2013; O'Connor, 2011). Here the field often favours experiment-based empirical research to see how audiences receive different kinds of apologies, through which media, and after which scandals (Ho, 2012; Lee and Chung, 2012; Page, 2014; Utz, Schultz and Glocka, 2013). These analyses incorporate psychology, sociology and business management theory, are rich with case studies where apologies have failed or succeeded, and advise on the essential ingredients that apologies must include to be accepted.

This dissertation departs from that canon by bringing the corporate public apology into conversation with media and communications theories in the context of capitalism. It is widely recognized that capitalism is both economic and cultural, ‘a point of view and a way of life’ (‘Capitalism’; Gresham, 1996: 60). Furthermore, it is ideological, with implications for how people imagine goodness and progress in their society (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram and Tincknell, 2004: 150). This dissertation thus applies both cultural studies and political economy approaches to ideology through communications. The two approaches are often set in competition in the media and communications field, but this is a tired dichotomy that this dissertation hopes to avoid (Ibid.: 136). What follows is a review of relevant concepts in each approach, which informs the subsequent empirical chapter.

### **Cultural Studies: The corporate public apology as a cultural text**

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February 3). Too Many Sorry Excuses for Apology. *The New York Times*, p. B1. Retrieved from

John Fiske (1990) outlines two definitions of communications: an event involving a recipient's personal interpretation of a message, or an event by which a recipient is influenced by a message's sender (40). The cultural studies approach to media tends to uphold the interpretive definition. Many authors emphasize that cultural objects are standalone texts to be analysed in their own right, in relation to a reader's active, unique reading (Durham and Kellner, 2006: ix; Turner, 2003: 18). This camp of scholars developed out of an older tradition that was seen as 'elitist and reductionist' because of its arguments that mass media and culture was primarily an extension of an economic superstructure (Kellner, 1995: 1). In response, cultural studies became 'awesomely broad in intellectual sweep' as it drew upon other disciplines, such as race and gender studies, for more ways to analyse culture and audiences (Golding and Murdock, 1978: 339; Kellner, 1995). By embracing the discursive character of everyday social practices (Hall, 1997), cultural studies theorists have been able to uncover the potential for 'complex, ambivalent and contested' meanings attributed to texts across television, film, music and advertising (Hesmondhalgh, 2007: 4).

Still, media theorist Stuart Hall (1973) has explained that texts can exhibit widely read 'dominant or preferred meanings' because they have been 'imprinted' by a society's institutional, political or ideological order. Such texts are 'decoded' the way they were 'encoded,' though Hall emphasized that such linear interpretation is still the reader's choice (513). Hall (1973) also explained that messages are known to carry two levels of meaning: denotative, which are literal and in a sense universal, and connotative, which are deeper, more associative and transformable. At both levels, though, a message can be saturated by a currently dominant ideology, even if no one realizes it. One example of these stratified meanings could be Roland Barthes' (1972) observation that margarine advertisements in France always started with an immediate 'cry of indignation' about the strangeness of the product, before encouraging the viewer to let go of their 'progressive prejudices' and see how 'digestible, economical, useful in all circumstances' it actually was (42). This was a literal explanation of the advertisement. Crucially, though, Barthes found that this strategy was a common pattern of rhetoric in France – of neutralizing a weakness by first proclaiming it. It was a 'paradoxical but incontrovertible means of exalting' various new products (41). Other authors have discovered that this happens over time, too, such that authentic resistance to authorities is 'co-opted' by those authorities, gradually (During, 2007: 16). Media theorist Dick Hebdige's trajectory of work is a good example of this: he first wrote about British punk

youth cultures in the 1970s that used style to resist mainstream aesthetics, but later admitted 'he had underestimated the power of commercial culture to appropriate, and indeed, to produce, counter-hegemonic styles' (During, 2007: 429). This is how culture can be used both to oppress minority groups or free minority groups in society.

Yet recent changes in media technology may have strengthened the argument that communications are not so much coercive as cooperative and creative. Some sociologists and media theorists argue that the world has moved into a new historical age ('postmodern' or 'second modernity,' among others) that has changed social hierarchies in an unprecedented way. Jean Baudrillard's (1983) questioning of the concept of 'real' has been used to support many hypotheses that there are no permanently enforceable definitions or realities. Others believe that traditional, top-down models of power have been weakened by popular movements of resistance and upheaval that today's online media forms facilitate (Baudrillard, 1983; Beck, 1992; Castells, 1996; Poster, 1990). Sociologist Scott Lash (2007) has proposed that the world is in fact 'post-hegemonic,' meaning that modern communications has become so instantaneous and ubiquitous that traditional authority systems have given way to a world where anyone can vie for power in any everyday situation (55). The basic idea is that new media and communications have ushered in a more participatory world, one that is horizontal and not vertical.<sup>4</sup> Other optimists about the new economy and society include Yochai Benkler (2006) and Henry Jenkins (2006), who see the Internet and social media fostering a revolution of users breaking down structures of top-down authority.

Corporate public apologies occur in this arguably nonlinear media environment. Business journal and ethics studies over the last half-century have grown increasingly convinced that today's corporations commit themselves to 'social contracts' with consumers that curtail their autonomy (Gray, Owen and Maunders, 1988; Hooghiemstra, 2000; Shocker and Sethi, 1974: 67). The rise of corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies seems to evidence this contract by showing corporate efforts to be more transparent or engage with NGOs and stakeholders beyond their shareholders (Shocker and Sethi, 1974; Reynolds and Yuthas, 2008). These efforts suggest a constructive relationship between companies and consumers. Business management scholars Mark Lee Hunter, Marc Le Menestrel and Henri-Claude de Bettignies (2008) supported this idea in their studies of a boycott against dairy-product corporation Danone in 2001 in France. They warned that businesses that use communications to

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<sup>4</sup> It demands noting that 'postmodern' is merely one angle of description and/or critique of the cultural studies tradition (Durham and Kellner, 2006: 448). It has been explored in this dissertation for its repeated mention by the more political economy-minded media theorists whose comments are explored in the next chapter.



unilaterally control public opinion only 'carry growing risks in terms of conflict' because disgruntled consumers had become a powerful force on corporate profits that companies needed to address and engage (335). With the advent of more horizontal communications like the Internet and social media, attempts to manipulate the public single-handedly were unlikely to reap benefits.

This view of corporate communications gives less credence to corporations as manipulative message makers. Recent analyses have insisted that a fixed, top-down view of corporate messages 'neglects the interactive and often iterative process' by which a company is defined, recognized and seen by its consumers (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990: 186; Neilsen and Rao, 1987). In other words, companies are not guaranteed survival in the marketplace, their owners not ensured wealth, and 'consumers devise their own representations of the product or the brand in question' (Audebrand and Iacobus, 2008: 4). This view echoes the cultural studies emphasis on the fluid and flexible nature of messages (Hall, 1997). Communications professor Michael Karlberg (1996) has therefore brought nuance to the notion that PR is an 'instrument of commerce... a means of influencing consumer values and behaviour' (266); Patricia Curtin and T. Kenn Gaither (2005) have also called for research that acknowledges PR as a 'synergistic, nonlinear, dynamic process' (93). According to these views, a corporate public apology could resemble the Sony Walkman the way cultural studies theorists du Gay et al. analysed it in their iconic 1997 study: an object of culture whose meaning for society is diverse, dynamic and different depending on the audience. Approaching corporate public apologies through cultural studies suggests it should not be automatically defined as a tool of public manipulation for corporate interests, but as possible evidence of organic public protest and uncontrollably defined.

### **Political economy: The corporate public apology as commodity or propaganda**

A less sanguine view of communication's role in society may be found in political economy analyses, but a brief foray into the economic background may be useful first. Recent years have seen a resurgence in the amount of attention being paid to neoliberalism, a political and economic system that says that the optimal way to provide for the public good is the 'laissez-faire' market system, free of government influence (beyond subsidies and emergency loans).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The term 'neoliberalism' has evolved through numerous definitions since its introduction in the early twentieth century, and is still widely debated (Thorsen, 2010). This dissertation uses a definition offered by barrister Daniel Stedman Jones (2012) as 'the free market ideology based on individual liberty and limited government that connected human freedom to the actions of the rational, self-interested actor' (2); and by David Harvey (2005) as a belief that 'human welfare is to be maximized and enhanced by a system based on private property, free markets,

This current strain of capitalism has characterized the last 24 years in most postindustrial, developed countries. Its advocates associate it with ‘the most globally organized and deeply entrenched order the world has ever seen’ (Ikenberry, 2014: 89) and, normatively, ‘a real hope of a better future’ for all (Friedman, 1951: 93). Neoliberalism's adversaries, too, acknowledge it is ‘the defining political economic paradigm of our time,’ but argue that it benefits only the ‘extremely wealthy investors and less than one thousand large corporations’ while pretending to do ‘poor people, the environment and everybody else a tremendous service’ (McChesney, 1998: 7-8; Surin, 2009; Wolff, 2012). There is an extreme divide of opinion over neoliberalism and its claims about societal welfare (Harvey, 2005).

Communications may be at the heart and serve as the mouthpiece of these capitalist societies. Political economists find that they play a ‘central double role’ as profit-seeking industries in themselves (e.g. public relations (PR) agencies, communications firms, film studios, etc.) and as intangible places where ‘the overall system is imagined and argued over’ (McChesney, 2007; Wasko et al., 2011: 2). In other words, they not only operate according to capitalist business logic, but also produce goods that portray and often justify that logic. Communications scholar Katherine Sender (2006) has found this at work in NBC Universal Bravo's award-winning reality TV show *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which featured five gay men giving style, life and love advice to a new heterosexual subject every episode. There had been mainstream controversy about how the show stereotyped homosexual men, but Sender instead pointed out the show's implicit idealization that ‘consumption facilitates positive change’ like confidence, love and happiness (134). This neoliberal idea was far less criticized in mainstream media, revealing the powerful way media objects can push specific political and economic campaigns, even if they are not explicitly engaged in ideological warfare. This is why PR guru David Ogilvy could once state that the *Reader's Digest* was ‘doing as much as the United States Information Agency to win the battle for men's minds’ (Schiller, 1976: 6). However, Kellner (1995) has expressed concern that media and communications scholarship has forgotten the urgency of this power, sweeping it instead under banners of ‘difference, multiplicity, eclecticism, populism, and intensified consumerism’ (7).

However, popular critical analysis may be difficult because of the ‘near sacred aura’ around capitalism that mainstream media and corporate interests have constructed. Some scholars

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free trade, entrepreneurial liberties, freedoms and the like.’ This general idea of largely unregulated global markets gathered steam around 1970, and was applied in 1989 into a set of policy prescriptions known as the Washington Consensus. Prior to this Consensus, the U.S. and Europe had been following the contrasting and relatively more rule-based Bretton Woods system (Chomsky, 1999: 150; Harvey, 1990: 141; Keylor, 2006: 246; Picketty, 2014; Surin, 2009: 2).

argue that capitalism and modern-day neoliberalism have become so deeply embedded in the general consciousness as an assumed fact of reality that few even know what they are (Chomsky, 1999; Wolff, 2012). On the flip side, those who dare to debate them are considered mentally unstable (Wolff, 2012: 272). For example, American lawyer and journalist Glenn Greenwald (2013) has written extensively about how Western media establishments tend to question the mental stability of people who 'engage in any meaningful dissent against the society's most powerful factions and their institutions' – a technique notably shared by the Soviet Union (Chomsky, 1999: 55).<sup>6</sup> Philosopher Noam Chomsky has said that Western media must do this to maintain the 'necessary illusion' that privately gained profits filter down to their communities (McChesney, 1998: 14). Yet this modern-day censorship need not be consciously or conspiratorially organized (Ibid.). Dominant ideologies can be perpetuated, and their alternatives silenced, by anyone because they 'appear natural, they seem to be common sense' (Durham and Kellner, 2006: xiv; Kellner, 2005: 1). Those who live within them may not know them, let alone know how to criticize them.

Blind consumer consent was the essence of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique of the Hollywood industry in 1972 when they said, 'the triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them' (167). They felt that audiences were told they were free when in fact they were choosing within a limited set of options in the late capitalist system whose 'raison d'être is to bring every aspect of human life into the economic arena, where it is transformed into a commodity' (Rifkin, 2014: 2). In many ways, Adorno and Horkheimer saw what theorist Steven Lukes' (1974) called the most 'insidious' form of power: altering someone's desire to align with your own (27). Adorno and Horkheimer's theories were critiqued as being unempirical, deterministic and pessimistic, but their concerns remain prescient. Beneath their rhetoric lies the wariness that consumer culture is advertised as freedom while disguising exploitation. Thus, while technology enthusiast Jeremy Rifkin (2014) has hailed the Internet as an exit route from capitalism's arguably abusive aspects, other research has found the Internet exhibiting the same patterns of inequality the more it is parsed out by corporate parties (Wihbey, 2014). Media scholar Robin Mansell (2004) thus asks the academic community to acknowledge the optimism of new media and communications without forgetting the power structures potentially 'embedded within them' (97; Schiller, 1976, 1991). After being marginalized by the more culturally celebratory trends in academia (Kellner, 1995; McChesney, 2007), Marx's warnings about 'the dark side of capitalism' and its ideological hold on society may be regaining traction (Fuchs and Mosco, 2012: 129).

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<sup>6</sup> Greenwald, G. (2013, March 23). How Noam Chomsky is discussed. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from

The relevant question is how corporate public apologies relate to these structures. This highly publicized version of apology is usually discussed as a part of corporate communications, which can be traced to the 1930s when the mass production of goods was the reigning industrial paradigm, and companies also began focusing on mass messaging to secure consumer attention (Cornelissen, 2008; van Riel, 1995).<sup>7</sup> Since then, corporate communications has developed into a strategic arm of essentially all large organizations to ensure favorable reputations and promote organizational objectives (Ibid.). A successful corporate public apology might then be a valuable coin for private interests, designed to regain consumer trust for the sake of profits; an unsuccessful apology might then be a 'communication failure' (Fiske, 1990: 2). But the contextualized view of political economy analysis allows us to see that even a failure on an individual level can be 'appropriated' into a larger swathe of systemic propaganda that still supports the corporate interest (Sussman, 2012: 478). As speech communication scholar Christine Harold (2007) has suggested, 'corporate and anticorporate rhetorics do not *oppose* one another so much as feed off and respond to one another.' This is one way to explain how apologies might strengthen pro-capitalist ideologies over time (xxxii).

### **Culture and Economy: Perspectives in Balance**

Analyses of modern life that address only culture or only economy are oversimplified and tell only one side of the story (Silverstone, 2005: 190; Kellner and Durham, 2006: 197). This is a serious analytical oversight at a time when the line between economy and culture is hard to distinguish, especially in post-industrial, developed countries where capitalism is the predominant logic of life (Garnham, 1986; Johnson et al., 2004: 137). The above review of concepts in cultural studies and political economy shows that corporate public apologies can be analysed textually, as a cultural form with various meanings, and contextually, as propaganda or a commodity within an economic system. Together these views set the stage for this dissertation's primary investigation: *How do corporate public apologies resist or reaffirm the principles of capitalism?*

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<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/mar/23/noam-chomsky-guardian-personality>.

<sup>7</sup> Geographer and anthropologist David Harvey (1990) has written extensively about how the mass-production, standardized 'Fordist' mode of production in the early twentieth century shifted in the 1970s toward a more global, mobile regime of 'flexible accumulation' of capital, labor, products and consumption (147). Harvey posited that this new fluidity of material capital played a role in the increasing fluidity of intellectual thought, e.g., the pluralist, postmodernist thought that also emphasizes 'the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life' (173). In this way he draws a link between material changes in societies to immaterial, intellectual changes.

## **METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **Rationale for Interviews**

This project took a qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) research approach because it was interested in how a group of people think about and explain a particular topic: the corporate public apology. As Colin Robson (2011) explains, people ‘are conscious, purposive actors who have ideas about their world and attach meaning to what is going on around them’ (17). This project assumed that such ideas are not only valuable for others to understand, but are best revealed through equally exploratory methods (Robson, 2011). This project's methodology could further be classified as socially constructionist because of its interest in the ‘multiple perspectives’ of participants (Burr, 2003; Robson, 2011: 24).

Qualitative methods abound, but the researcher chose in-depth interviews because they provide direct access to participants' viewpoints. Simply put, ‘the best way to find out what the people think about something is to ask them’ (Bower, 1973: vi). An interview ‘allows the person to respond in their own words,’ which is a crucial indicator of how they understand the topic (Hayes, 2000: 121; 126). Current research on corporate apologies, and business management or corporate communications in general, rarely seeks personal voices for empirical data, instead pasting existing theory and structural lenses onto case studies to extrapolate corporate motivations. Media scholar Aeron Davis (2007) found this glaring chasm of empirical evidence in studies of politician decision-making as well, which informed his extensive series of interviews with political respondents to gauge how their ideologies inform behaviours. Interviews uncover a stock of complex knowledge and implicit and explicit assumptions that this project hoped to unveil (Flick, 2014: 217; Scheele and Groeben, 1988).

There were other options among qualitative methodologies, each of which offer unique advantages, but were in some way inappropriate for this project. Ethnography, for example, involves longer periods of observation ‘to understand people's actions and their experiences of the world,’ which would have provided a rich scape of data on the topic (Brewer, 2000: 11). However, its time-consuming and intrusive nature made it an unrealistic methodology for studying a relatively inaccessible population: high-ranking workers whose daily activities include confidential company meetings and who ‘are accustomed to efficient use of their time’ (Bernard, 2000: 91). Most crucially, ethnographies collect data largely through observation (Brewer, 2000: 10), while this project needed to go beyond observation to ‘ask questions about the beliefs people hold’ (Davidson and Layder, 1994: 31).

Focus groups and survey/questionnaires also presented significant disadvantages for this project. Firstly, focus groups gather several participants at once for discussion, requiring an elaborate and highly unrealistic coordination of schedules given the issues already mentioned. It was also likely that grouping participants would preclude open conversation about a topic as potentially sensitive as apologies, especially if participants came from organizations with competing interests. Similarly, surveys and questionnaires would not engage participants' worldviews as deeply, nor allow for the flexibility and unexpected turns of discussion that interviews encourage.

The potential downfalls of interviews also deserve noting, though their strength to 'look beyond ordinary, everyday ways' of understanding a topic was ultimately the most crucial factor (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 11-14). Interviews have been critiqued for weakening the 'regulative principles' of validity and reliability (Maso, 2003: 40). The social science's historical 'quest for "objective" data' had assumed in the past that human subjectivity 'contaminates' valuable research (Hayes, 2000: 120-121). Interviewers were expected to structure standardized interviews as rigidly as possible as a result (Holstein and Gubrium, 1997: 3). Interviews were also seen as un-replicable, though reliability is the social science community's main form of self-correction (Robson, 2011). For this particular project, the researcher had to consider how participants might mar the interview's validity by treating it as a PR opportunity for personal or organizational purposes (Gilding, 2010). However, interviewees were ensured repeatedly of their anonymity and non-attribution to quotes, which also helped to secure interviews in the first place. Interviewees were also reminded of the investigation's academic nature and encouraged to be as frank and open as possible during the interview.

By consciously remedying the potential weaknesses of interviews, interviewers expand upon the strengths of the interview methodology. Interviews garner a wealth of data by highlighting 'the uniqueness of human beings' and grounding research conclusions in reality as it is perceived by participants (Hayes, 2000: 169). Kristin Esterberg (2002) has further suggested that qualitative research is unique in growing more valuable the more analytical insight and investment the researcher brings (13). In the end, it remains important that the researcher stay explicit with the academic community about her research design choices; the following section exists for this purpose.

## Sampling

This project aimed to speak with people as close to the act of a public apology as possible. In practice, this meant people in high positions in their organizations. Empirical research depth would be gained by their tenure and level of authority in their fields. Breadth would be gained by speaking with representatives from various sectors in society, to comment on the topic. These initial criteria meant that sampling was done ‘non-randomly,’ with a particular purpose (Jensen, 2002: 238). By the end, interviewees had been conducted with management and executive-level figures in organizations spanning banking, business, consulting, consumer retail, crisis communications, defense, finance, international development, news, politics, social networking, technology and telecommunications. They were able to comment on corporate public apologies both as powerful representatives of their own organizations, and as the consumers and audience of other corporate businesses.

This group of people is often classified as ‘elite’ and known for being generally inaccessible for research interviews. This meant that, after primary criteria, convenience and snowball sampling were the technical strategies used to reach participants (Bernard, 2000: 179; Gilding, 2010). Five interviewees were approached at a business-related event, conference or LSE course, i.e., convenience sampling (Robson, 2011: 400). Eight interviewees were approached through a personal referral of a relative, an LSE professor and several staff at StockWell Communications, i.e., snowball sampling.<sup>8</sup>

The following chart lists participants' rank of job titles as a proxy for exact identification; they have been de-specified and detached from industry to protect the interviewees' anonymity.

**Table 1. Interviewee Types**

Interview Type	Abridged Job Title
1. Individual	Co-Founder
2. Individual	Head
3. Individual	Director
4. Individual	Chief Officer
5. Individual	Director
6. Individual	Vice President

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<sup>8</sup> In January 2014, LSE media think tank Polis and StockWell Communications jointly awarded this researcher's early proposal for this project with a monetary prize and an internship at StockWell to write another, distinct report that utilizes the same raw data as this dissertation. That report is scheduled for publication by Polis and StockWell in early 2015. More information about that separate report and award can be found at <http://www.lse.ac.uk/media@lse/Polis/scholarships/scholarships.aspx> and <http://www.stockwellgroup.com/stocktake/the-lse-polis-stockwell-communications-research-prize>.

7. Individual	Head
8. Individual	Politician/Political Advisor
9. Individual	Senior Vice President
10. Individual	Head
11. Individual	Head
12. Individual	Director
13. 2 Individuals <sup>9</sup>	Directors

## Topic Guide

The topic guide, or list of questions to guide the interview, underwent several iterations prior to interviews. The researcher conducted about half a dozen pilot interviews to settle upon a guide that was focused enough to accommodate shorter interviews but open enough to incorporate an interviewee's free flow of thought (Esterberg, 2002: 94). The guide took on a final form with three main headings encompassing: *Why* corporate public apologies were necessary; *How* they should be conducted; *What* defined them; and the effect of mainstream or social media. These headings served as gateways to the numerous, broader themes within which interviewees explored corporate public apologies.

## Ethical Considerations

The privacy and anonymity of each interviewee was of the utmost importance for this project, given the potential sensitivity of the topic and their own status in their respective organizations (Esterberg, 2002: 45). Each participant was assured that their name would not be shared outside of our meeting, nor attributed to any quote. They were asked if the interviews could be recorded for subsequent analysis. They also signed an agreement form confirming they had been notified of their privacy, and acknowledging their consent to the interview.

A significant ethical consideration was the project's 'socially situated character' in discussions of business and morality (Becker, 1967; Hammersley, 2000: 3). Sociologist Howard Becker (1967) has suggested that social researchers inevitably prioritize some group in their work, whether 'subordinate' or 'superordinate' in the social hierarchy (245). Others have felt that

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<sup>9</sup> This interview was originally scheduled with one participant, who invited a close colleague to join the meeting given their interest and expertise around the topic.



social science studies inevitably make a value-laden statement about the status quo and social change, whether the researchers intended it or not (Hammersley, 2000: 3). These points were crucial to consider for this project because corporate public apologies inherently follow some form of conflict between different parties across business, government and society. Moreover, this project explored the opinion of what are methodologically called ‘elites,’ as explored above, which are arguably society’s ‘superordinate’ group. However, this project was pursued in the firm belief that exploring this point of view does not automatically constitute a bias toward this group, but rather a commitment to adding knowledge to a larger conversation within which corporate public apologies lie. This researcher aimed to locate an empirically overlooked perspective.

These ethical concerns were reviewed and approved at the LSE in early 2014.

### **Conducting Interviews**

Interviews were scheduled via email. Eight were conducted in person at either the interviewee’s home or office in London, U.K., and five were conducted over Skype/phone call. Several cases of unpredictable schedule changes meant that the shortest interview lasted just over 10 minutes and the longest an hour and a half, but the majority of interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. As explained above, the interview guide was designed specifically to accommodate this general variability.

## **RESULTS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION**

### **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic, rather than content or more numerical, analysis was used to derive conclusions because the interviews produced wide, discursive sets of data that were conducive to more descriptive forms of inquiry (Hayes, 2000: 124-125). Interviews were audio recorded, manually transcribed and anonymized before the analysis process. The researcher then gathered similar data points and patterns, especially the ‘recurring statements, attributions or assumptions,’ within the interviews. These were then categorized into themes, which were the main units of analysis (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Hayes, 2000: 171). Transcripts were read numerous times to ensure that none were overlooked in the process of theme construction. The themes were adapted numerous times to take full account of the

data the longer and more repeatedly they were read (Hayes, 2000: 176; Rice and Ezzy, 2000: 199; 258). The ultimate aim was to ensure that all derived conclusions were firmly rooted in the raw data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 83; Hayes, 2000: 176).

The following section includes quotes that most clearly represent their theme and demonstrate the major consensuses and divergences among the interviews regarding corporate public apologies. Analysis also explores how interviewees knowingly and unknowingly contradicted themselves (to various extremes) - points of dissonance that can arise between and within interviews that contribute to the value and insightfulness of the interview methodology.

Quotes remain anonymous and are numbered to clarify which come from the same source; these numbers refer to Table 1 in the previous chapter.

## **Results and Interpretation**

Four main themes are explored below. They can be read cumulatively, as they progressively grow in explanatory power. The *In Summary* section that follows clarifies how they come together as a whole.

### *A. Corporate public apologies demonstrate morality*

The most basic question was if and why company apologies were necessary and most interviewees gave a clear answer: Yes, because it was the 'right' thing to do. They did not immediately point to financial, shareholder or value-adding reasons. They used words such as 'right,' 'wrong,' 'good' and 'bad' to contextualize corporate apologies and why they were a part of corporate communications practices. Interviewees invoked this concept of morality without hesitation and often in passing as if it were a broadly known fact:

You have to apologize when you're confident that your company acted inappropriately. Right? You have to. Now that is the same thing as you or me doing an apology to each other... (6)

If we have a significant ethical failing in the company, we deal with it, we learn from it, and we tell people. (7)

I think people, when they make mistakes, do have to apologize. Whether it's well-received or meaningful is a different matter. (9)

If it's a genuine error, obviously there should be an apology and that's the best of dealing with it. (10)

It's an admission of wrongdoing. (11)

Companies are run by human beings... They therefore do bad things by accident, or even occasionally by design. So of course there is the need for them sometimes to apologize. (12)

This sense of morality also influenced expectations for the way in which companies should conduct public apologies. For example, interviewees felt that companies should express strong self-awareness about their wrongdoing, especially by repeating what the wrongdoing in question had been:

Some companies make mistakes or realize they're not doing the right thing in terms of their ethical values or commitments to the outside world and they decide not to communicate [that] because it's not coming into public awareness. But, obviously, the best thing to do as a company is be absolutely honest and declare what your intentions are...

The more you try to cover up the mistake with a reason that is not believable, or simply a story that is not credible, the worse it does for your corporate reputation. (4)

You have to admit you did it. Right? So you have to say, 'I did something - wrong.' And that sort of seems obvious, but sometimes companies act unclear on that. Number two, which is obvious, is you have to say you're sorry. Clearly say you're sorry. 'Here's what I did, and I'm sorry.' (6)

You acknowledge that you have done something wrong. That's got to be the sort of starting point. (11)

These responses empirically support studies arguing that businesses are tethered to larger moral codes (Tilly, 2008). For example, Salvador, Folger and Priesemuth (2012) have argued that theoretical models for corporate communications exaggerate the rationality of profit-seeking and forget the 'role of moral emotions,' such as guilt, that managers might feel and that inform their actions (125). They suggest that a manager that feels genuine accountability and guilt is 'likely to evoke more positive responses from external stakeholders' (135). Interviewees shared this argument, both from personal experience as apologizers or as the consumer recipients of other companies' apologies.

A few interviewees broached the fickle nature of social mores, exploring recent examples of corporate public apologies that showed how subjective and contested these supposedly

shared morals were. One interviewee mentioned the recent case of the CEO of Mozilla, who resigned less than two weeks into the job after news resurfaced that he had contributed to a controversial anti-gay marriage campaign in the United States. Then, after his resignation, further controversy had begun as to whether his freedom of speech had been attacked.<sup>10</sup> These interviewees felt that companies needed to apologize after breaching moral codes, but admitted that the initial task of defining those codes was problematic:

The private, personal views of the CEO on a matter of social-political controversy shouldn't necessarily have led to that kind of action [resignation of Mozilla CEO Brendan Eich]...

It's just to do with conflicting social norms that are not directly relevant to the organization's activities... The tricky thing is that you've got these ever-shifting definitions... (10)

[CEOs] are seen more as leaders now, and everything that goes with that. And they're held to account to a degree that goes beyond what was the case a few decades ago in business. They're held to a standard almost of what you'd expect, that we're holding democratically elected politicians to.

What is the acceptable ideology now in my business? Certainly in the West, there is an ill-defined set of beliefs and values that lead on to policy positions and policy standards which are acceptable or unacceptable... (12)

Media theorist Nick Couldry (2003) has also taken issue with the idea that public events or performances, or 'media rituals,' are an accurate expression of a society's shared values. He instead suggested that such events are the 'the articulation of contingent and historically specific' power structures, still catering to specific interests in society, such as media conglomerates or government (Ibid.: 37). Yet interviewees broadly maintained that corporate public apologies arose from a 'backdrop of a dominant moral code' that was sourced from the average consumer and society (Lull and Hinerman, 2005: 4).

### *B. Corporate public apologies communicate individualized responsibility*

Interviewees agreed that the essence of good corporate public apologies was how much they showed a company was changing, reforming, or solving the problem on its own. Despite stark disagreements about specific wording, timing, and delivery, there was little doubt that companies needed to use apologies to communicate some change and reform:

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on this particular event, see: Baker, M. (2014, April 3). Brendan Eich Steps Down as Mozilla CEO. *The Mozilla Blog*. Retrieved from <https://blog.mozilla.org/blog/2014/04/03/brendan-eich-steps->

So I went public again, saying, 'We are very disappointed about this, but we believe that we have taken the proper corrective actions, and we are calling all other industry players to help us in attacking this issue...'

When you demonstrate that you're working hard to fix the problem, public image and reputation will adapt very quickly, because those outside will read commitment and honesty... to fix the problem and do everything possible so it doesn't happen again. (4)

The sincerity of it is emphasized using actions... The public trusts companies that not only say 'I'm sorry' but say 'This is what I'm going to do.' (5)

Apology without compensation will come across as hollow to members of the public. You gotta say, 'We're not going to do this again... We're going above and beyond what anybody thinks, would've thought we were going to do.' You do those things, you got a reasonable chance of the public saying, 'Okay, these people are really sincere.' Just like if it was a friend of yours. (6)

You don't have to come out and say 'I'm sorry' to do the right thing. What you do is the right thing, and as part of the right thing you ensure that the right people are involved. You do the right thing by repairing the damage you've created. You do the right thing by trying to prevent that ever from ever occurring again...

[On most memorable apologies: the Zeebrugge ferry accident in 1987] it would probably be one of the major accidents that really changed the way an industry operated or a service was provided... those kind of iconic things sort of stick in my mind as they were too late, but when they happened they made a difference. (7)

You're not going to get much kudos from it [the apology]. You might slow the tide or you might stop the story. But then you're going to have a lot of work to do after that... If you don't say 'sorry' but you change and people see it, maybe you get the trust back. Because people respect action. I'll emphasize it: action not words...

The apology isn't the end of it. It's the beginning. (8)

I can't imagine anybody having any real sense of, 'What is the value of the then-chief executive [Tony Hayward, BP oil spill] apologizing?' It was more about how do you go about mopping up the spills and handling compensation, how much you set aside to engage meaningfully in that, because there's been direct physical and measurable economic damage... (9)

The media can be extremely cynical. You have to give them context. You have to show them not why you're saying sorry but what you're doing about it. (11)

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[down-as-mozilla-ceo](#); and Zurcher, A. (2014, April 4). Is Mozilla CEO Brendan Eich a free speech martyr? *BBC News Echo Chambers*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-echochambers-26895858>.

They [apologies] can fail for multiple reasons. You've got the sincerity thing, which goes to how your business leader comes across. Then you've got how quickly can they move from words to action. (12)

It's the follow-through with actions and demonstrations of sincerity that's important... It's what you do rather than what you say. So there is meaning if it's a genuine signpost to contrition and reform. (13)

This focus on change was a broad point of agreement. As one interviewee explained, it was easy to gauge an apologizer's regret or remorse in private, interpersonal apologies. Public apologies, on the other hand, were not so transparent and had to compensate in clearer, often more tangible, ways. The 'proof of genuineness' for corporate public apologies had to be more apparent, especially given already low public trust in business and institutions (Edelman, 2014). In a way, interviewees were expressing a progressive agenda by viewing corporate public apologies as a channel for change, rather than just a statement. Media theorist Jodi Dean (2002) has also argued for the importance of demanding change rather than mere discussion, in the context of democratic societies. She found that the Internet age has made people so focused on the availability of information that they have forgotten the next step of acting on it. Fittingly, Dean used the example of a corporation that reveals to the public its unfavorable practices, like environmental degradation and slave labor; the problem now, though, was that 'people don't seem to mind, that they are so enthralled by transparency' (Dean, 2002: 174). She called for society to graduate from rhetoric and debate through to the 'decisive action' that actually alters outcomes and future practices (Ibid.). Interviewees made this same distinction between companies issuing apologies and companies implementing changes and, like Dean, favored the latter. In so doing, they showed awareness that the words of corporate public apologies alone were not sufficient.

However, some interviewees offered a more philosophical response to this demand for change. Several suggested that what consumers actually sought through corporate public apologies was sacrifice, cost and punishment – an ideal of justice. Sociologist Charles Tilly (2008) has explained that demands for 'total justice' are common to traditional cultures worldwide, but especially in democratic regimes, which have fostered 'the expectation that ordinary people could get it' (46-47). This could explain several interviewees' mention of resignations as an almost symbolic fulfillment of justice:

If it's [the apology] followed by a resignation, it's only because the public feel that the apology wasn't quite enough. In this country, sometimes apologize, hold your breath, and wait and see if that's enough. And if it's not enough then a sacrifice must follow. (5)

What the Catholics call 'due penance'... means that 'we're going to do more than what we need to do. We're going to apologize, we're going to do more than compensate you for your harm, we're going to do more than give you a way to track us so we'll never do it again, we're going to do something else that's going to cost us.' Maybe money, maybe something else. It's a penance. (6)

We've moved into a blame and compensation culture and I think that affects how we deal with apology and how we perceive apology, as well. It becomes part of a big machine now, of which the assumed end point is, 'I want some compensation.'...

Somebody has to be blamed. There has to be a fault of somebody else, you can't accept that you might have some responsibility or that *things happen*. (9)

If what the individual has done demonstrably contradicts company policy or the organization's interests, then an apology or even a resignation could be in order. (10)

Notably, these demands for justice were dispensed on an individualized basis, where 'the bad guys' were exceptional (or incompetent) companies or employees (Wolff, 2012: 51). They seemed to understand justice in terms of the 'well-defined actor' (Tilly, 2008: 40), a pattern that is even reflected in the string of bestseller books focusing on the personalities behind business scandals.<sup>11</sup> This individualist approach to corporate public apologies echoed a neoliberal understanding of events, which focuses on 'free people, taking their own risks and collecting their own rewards' (Gresham, 1996: 62; Hayek, 1996). Most interviewees were aware that low consumer trust in business was a broad-based issue, but corporate public apologies made reform an individualized affair. Meanwhile, there was little or no mention of broader cultural, historical or socioeconomic patterns behind the need for apologies. This tendency to personalize large-scale developments in society is characteristic of neoliberal-leaning societies (Volcic and Andrejevic, 2009).

### *C. Corporate public apologies are self-driven*

Interviewees expected corporate public apologies to be conducted voluntarily. Interviewees were skeptical of apologies conducted 'under duress,' or as a knee-jerk reaction to media,

political or public pressure. Statements that primarily seemed to be a crisis communications strategy were seen as unconvincing ('just PR,' so to speak). Interviewees wanted apologies that resulted from real contrition and self-awareness:

They need to convince themselves internally that what they're doing is absolutely necessary and it's fixing the issue at the root cause level. They need to convince themselves first so they can convince the outside world that their actions, their intentions and their commitment are absolutely honest, and appropriate. It needs to be more done with the goal, the intention to fix the problem more than trying to minimize the damage in terms of public image or credibility. (4)

Sometimes they make the mistake - they apologize too early in the crisis, immediately, when in every crisis, as information comes in first, it's unclear, ambiguous and often wrong. So you have to be careful. You have to apologize when you're confident that your company acted inappropriately. (6)

There is a sort of unwritten rule that apologies are always too late. It's very, very seldom you ever see a well-timed apology, mainly because the point at which anyone in the public eye decides they need to apologize tends to be because they've been forced to, not because they think they've done something wrong. And so, in the end, most public apologies feel fake because they mostly are. They're mostly about managing a crisis situation, thinking that an apology will diffuse it...

The public will be able to sniff out a real apology from one that's been forced on you by a PR crisis company... either say it with real humility and sense of genuineness, or don't. (8)

If it's done late in the day, partly because you're forced to apologize like the recent MP [Maria Miller], it's too late. Damage done. It's seen as part of politically managing, or public image managing, as opposed to being meaningful. (9)

If there's any feeling internally, or there is no owning up to the responsibility that you've done something wrong, and you're apologizing for something, it will always come across as being... contextualized and not being true and not being fair and it will come across as being, I believe, not genuine. (11)

Do the apology on your own terms... if the media drive it for you, or politicians drive it for you, then you've lost. (13)

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<sup>11</sup> For example: *Barbarians at the Gate* by Wall Street Journal's Bryan Burrough and John Helyar (1990); *The Smartest Guys in the Room* by Fortune's Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind (2003); or *Too Big To Fail* by The New York Times' Andrew Ross Sorkin (2009).



Interviewees said both traditional and social media channels could force a company to publicly apologize. The significant point of disagreement was on social media, though, and specifically how democratic it was. Some interviewees saw social media encouraging corporate accountability and multilateral engagement with consumer interests. As we explored earlier in this dissertation, this view is also heralded by scholars who are optimistic that Internet-based networks empower consumers and allow consumers and corporate interests to better cooperate (Deuze, 2007; Jarvis, 2011). Similarly, these interviewees felt that social media finally gave voice to consumer interests, which could benefit corporate interests, too:

Social media has given people much more power to flag concerns... can actually be quite good for the business. (2)

Twenty years ago, you would expect to have mainly one or two few but very powerful channels to communicate to the external world. Today, those channels are - and they were verticals - today they're horizontals. People talk to each other, there is social media, there are digital networks. And the possibility to hide a problem in today's world becomes more and more difficult. So if you are faced with an issue that is absolutely linked to a mistake, you need to be aware that sooner rather than later there will be evidence being displayed by a very active public network out there that will make sure that your statements, your facts are wrong. (4)

I think public organizations have felt the need to apologize more and often apologize more rapidly and that's probably been as a result of the profusion of media sources, and in particular more recently the advent of social media, where the consumer's view, the voter's view of given issues has more saliency, affects stock prices or political support or perceived effects in the organization. So the rise in the noise, the rise in the ability to measure that noise, has created greater pressure and I think that organizations which in the past were more impervious or arrogant perhaps have responded to that. (10)

Once upon a time you lived in a country or a culture, and maybe even a regulatory or a legal regime, that allowed you to get away with things, nowadays it doesn't matter which country you're in: you can have media from another country scrutinizing you. Plus the Internet has enabled citizen journalism, so local people who didn't have voice get a voice...

It's not so long ago, if you were in trouble and you had to apologize... that might have depended on the view taken in half a dozen national newspapers. Whereas now, it could be a billion Twitter followers. Probably more democratic, and it's probably an advance. (12)

However, some of those interviewees balanced their views of social media with its less equitable aspects, particularly its inability to capture real public opinion. They questioned social media's equity if it could be appropriated by people with unrepresentative views:

I think you have to be careful not to create the danger of there being a mob mentality around these things... you have to ask the question about whether that kind of public pressure leading to an apology – or more – is the right thing because it means that organization's just being driven by the scale of the social media response potentially, as opposed to whether there's something which is a genuine offense or significant reputational risk for their organization. (10)

The problem with social media is that the stuff that takes off ignores the silent majority. And the most vociferous people - are they actually representative? Are they getting things out of perspective? I think this is where we are all still feeling our way, because it could be a million Twitter users. Are you going to say there are a million people out there gone hysterical, got this wrong? And you know what: sometimes the answer is Yes!... So if you had 40 people in a room, and one of them is going berserk about this and the others are more relaxed about it... It's very tricky. (12)

In a way, the spectrum of interviewee attitudes toward social media mirrored the academic debate around the public sphere, a concept widely credited to German sociologist Jurgen Habermas (1989). Habermas' public sphere was an idealized setting in democracies where citizens would rationally discuss the public good. Their discussions would represent a 'reasoned form of access to truth' about public opinion, which is how interviewees felt toward websites like Facebook and Twitter that putatively told them the 'truth' about their reputations (Calhoun, 1992: 17). Conversely, interviewees expressed concern about these forums' exclusionary nature, echoing many scholars' critique that Habermas' idealized public sphere inherently prioritized some groups in society over others (Calhoun, 1992; Fraser, 1990; Mouffe, 1999). Dean (2002) argued that not everyone has the same 'communicative capital,' in much the same way that the interviewee above implied not everyone is equally 'vociferous.'

Crucial to note is that interviewees used the public sphere idea so that it supported the corporate interest, while Habermas' public sphere existed only independently of business interests. This is because he, like many other theorists, viewed market influences and PR as inherently distortionary of democratic discussion (Castells, 2008: 80; McChesney, 2013: 66; Sparks, 2001: 78). Habermas believed that the only way democracy and capitalism could coexist was if his ideal public sphere were independent of both market and the state (though

his mentors, including Adorno and Horkheimer mentioned above, felt this was ultimately impossible) (Calhoun, 1992). This study's interviewees felt the opposite: that business could incorporate a public sphere, and democratic principles, for the benefit of both company and consumers in a way that was not undemocratic.

However, this discussion about democracy revealed a larger tension within interviews. That is, interviewees seemed to value democratized and socially engaged business at the same time they valued unpressured apologies. That is, while it was good for companies to respond to public pressure and consumer complaints, apologies had to appear distinctly non-responsive and self-driven. Interviewees were adamant that companies should not apologize just to quell a PR crisis or to re-secure consumer patronage, out of the worry that 'corporations cannot be sincere when apologizing since they are in it for the money' (Cohen and Samp, 2013: 757). The ideal corporate public apology would thus theoretically suspend the known fact that a company's mission is to generate profits, at least to consumers. It would instead prove that the company was, in a way, morally self-aware and self-regulating. This underlying tension across interviews made even more apparent the high expectation for corporate interests to be, in a way, morally self-aware and self-regulating entities.

#### *D. Corporate public apologies uphold the business leader*

Finally, interviewees suggested that corporate public apologies symbolized traits of strong leadership, like humility, risk-taking and bravery. They felt that a good apology could filter out the most admirable individuals from the rest. There was a particularly supportive and positive feeling to these comments:

At the end it's an act of leadership. I think accepting your mistakes as a corporation is the ultimate act of leadership...

[Steve Jobs'] communication style was outstanding because he recognized in public that he made a mistake but he also said, 'It's normal to make these mistakes - we're humans.' So he said no one is perfect, we're a human company... Shareholders didn't punish him or the company; quite the contrary, their level of tolerance and understanding for that mistake was so high, the company remained very successful and it kept growing. (4)

The ones that are willing to take the risk and be and bear all and take the criticism and respond to it and change actually become better businesses.

There is something about truly being great where you can forgive a lot of things. You're somebody people genuinely admire because you're genuinely admirable. You've got so many admirable qualities, sometimes a weakness... we can forgive. (8)

[Manchester United football manager] Alex Ferguson had a strong record and a strong power base within his company and he felt confident in his abilities to be able to push back on criticism... He was able to deflect criticism away by going on the offensive. And some CEOs are like this as well. (11)

People don't talk about businessmen or businesswomen, do they? They always talk about business 'leaders.'...

If you are in charge of a large corporation, then whether you want it or not, you've got a leadership position. And we expect a big corporation to be somewhere that opens its doors to everyone and leads by example. (12)

This harks back to the first theme of corporate public apologies and morality, where interviewees felt that business was governed by moral codes, and that apologies happened when the codes were broken. At the same time, business figures were seen as being at the forefront of those codes, like 'moral examples' (Lull and Hinerman, 2005: 25). This moral leadership was collapsed into business leadership, such that strong moral integrity would reinforce a company's mission to 'seek more profits, increase the size of the company, or gain a bigger share of the market' (Wolff, 2012: 92). As with democratic principles (part C.), ideas of morality were seen as helpful components within a larger business strategy.

Corporate public apologies seemed to represent a microcosm of society overall, where individuals and companies who apologized well were bestowed with much more expansive statuses of leadership in society more broadly. Interviewees gave personal evidence of what the management and accounting professors Joel Amernic and Russell Craig (2006) call the "cult status" that modern-day CEOs seem to enjoy (ix). The discussion around corporate public apologies often led interviewees to celebrate corporate success in almost philosophical terms of triumph and social good.

### *In Summary*

The research question of this dissertation was: *How do corporate public apologies resist or reaffirm the principles of capitalism?* This dissertation concludes that corporate public apologies counter corporate and capitalist priorities in an explicit, immediate sense, but reveal deeply neoliberal ideas about business corporations that are at the core of late

capitalist ideology. What follows is a formal outline of how both cultural studies and political economy analysis of the research interviews reveal their ideological assumptions.

Interviewees gave personal interpretations of corporate public apologies in which consumer demands forced the corporate hand, a view of corporate behavior that is more constructive than top-down (Curtin and Gaither, 2005; Hall, 1980). They saw the apologies as a result of factors beyond a company's control rather than a proactively manipulative corporate tool. In a way, companies were being unofficially regulated by consumer demands for morality (part A.) and social justice (part B.). Apologies served as evidence of a ground-up power of protest that consumers often publicized via social media (part C.), and that could directly oppose corporate powers. This 'denotative' and up-front interpretation of corporate public apologies is also held widely by voices in mainstream newspapers, which focus on disgruntled consumers and judge how corporations respond (Hall, 1973).

However, those conclusions were underpinned by less consciously acknowledged values that Hall (1973) might call the 'connotative,' or more associative and implicit, meanings of corporate public apologies. Interviewees described corporate public apologies as exceptional events where changing unacceptable corporate behavior was individualized on a case-by-case basis. There was little or no mention of patterns of wrongdoing or historical cycles of consumer distrust in business; the seemingly natural focus was on singular actors (part B.). Moreover, by valorizing corporate public apologies that looked self-imposed and unforced, interviewees idealized companies that acted morally of their own accord (part C.). Finally, corporate public apologies were seen as filtering out the most admirable businesspeople and role models (part D.). This set of secondary meanings was remarkably reflective of neoliberal ideology, which frames the market in terms of individualism, deregulation and social progression. Hall (1973) has noted that few people distinguish between the denotative and connotative meanings of every message they receive, but for analytical purposes, we see that both levels recreated a larger neoliberal, pro-corporate trend of thinking.

This same conclusion is reached through political economy analyses. Corporate public apologies were described explicitly as concessions to the public, not a preferred profit-seeking strategy. Yet the discourse around them constituted a set of *a priori* expectations that reinforced capitalist ideals whether or not an individual apology 'failed' or 'succeeded.' Marxist political economist Gerald Sussman (2012) might call this an "appropriation" of dissent, where pro-capitalist rhetoric is such an 'integrated strategy of development' that even seeming evidence of protest is still anchored in the status quo (480). Moreover, corporate public apologies were linked to stronger business, social values, and even "the

means both to deliver social goods and to deliver the ends, the good life itself" (part C. and D.) (Jones, 2012: 8). This suggests that the apologies contribute to that 'sacred aura' that society has built up around capitalism, simply by the way it communicates (McChesney, 1998: 7).

The idea that unlikely objects conceal far larger ideologies recalls Barthes (1972), mentioned earlier, who took phenomena ranging from wrestling matches to soap advertisements to French wine and argued that beneath their practical functions was hid 'the same ideological core,' the same self-supporting value system, of the French bourgeoisie (Hebdige, 1979: 9). Barthes' intention was to shed light on how 'common sense' and '*what-goes-without-saying*' assumptions about everyday life were never just 'natural' or inevitable (Barthes, 1972: 12). This dissertation has found that the corporate public apology may very well have fit into those essays, given its immediate practical purposes and simultaneous ideological underpinnings. However, as both McChesney (1998) and Hebdige (1989) have noted, this phenomenon of concealed meanings is not necessarily a covert operation driven by some exclusive social sect. Rather, because 'ideology by definition thrives *beneath* consciousness,' its power lies in the exact fact that it can go unnoticed by everyone, including those who benefit from it (Hebdige, 1979: ; emphasis in the original).

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation used corporate public apologies as evidence that objects of communication can perform deep and unexpected ideological roles, resisting dominant systems of thought at one level while reaffirming them at another. It found that discussions about these apologies swim within a far larger neoliberal mode of thinking, supporting the unique values of advanced capitalist societies even as they seem to do the opposite. Other studies have explored these nuances, as well. Proffitt, Tchoi and McAllister (2007) analyzed how the anti-consumerist fictional narrative *The Matrix* became Time Warner's ironic ticket to an intensely profitable, multi-commodity marketing strategy. Volcic and Andrejevic (2009) similarly explored how historical racism and class conflict were portrayed as purely personal issues in *To Sam Ja*, a Balkan reality TV show, an exemplary demonstration of neoliberal values on screen. The studies showed how the analysis of communications objects serves as a proxy for the analysis of ideologies, and as a pre-runner to questions about how they run our society and why. This dissertation brought these essential questions out beyond the entertainment industry.

At the same time, this dissertation left many doors open for further exploration. For one, its research was based in a Western framework, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom. However, capitalist economies exhibit different gradations of capitalism, from less regulated to more state-controlled. Recent research suggests that global corporate communications and PR fracture along geographical borders accounts for 'different identities, different forms of representation, different regulatory environments, and different modes of production and consumption' (Cheney and Christiansen, 2001; Curtin and Gaither, 2005: 110). Others have observed that 'I'm sorry' means different things in different countries (Maddux, Kim, Okumura and Brett, 2012). Further study could bridge these disparate hypotheses to ask how views of capitalism are revealed differently in different cultures, through corporate public apologies or other seemingly simple statements.

This research also invokes questions about the past, particularly the ways neoliberal ideas have been communicated by policymakers and financial institutions since the early twentieth century. Barrister Daniel Stedman Jones (2012) has observed that 'a historical perspective has been sorely lacking' on neoliberalism, contributing to the 'myth' that it was inevitable and not a purposeful choice by politicians, economists and journalists who supported it (12). As this dissertation has shown, the analytical tools of the media and communications field prove invaluable for this task of uncovering ideologies. Future research can ask how neoliberalism was publicized following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, for example – another moment when

‘capitalism seemed in apocalyptic crisis’ (Jones, 2012: 3). An entire generation of developed, post-industrial countries would gain deep self-awareness by investigating how their own entertainment industries and corporate communications practices have channeled the neoliberal paradigm since then.

This dissertation also makes a case for investigating large political and economic forces from the ground up. Media theorist Aeron Davis (2007) has observed that most political economy studies neglect to ask powerful individuals for their ideas, looking only at their public actions and big media events to prove longstanding hierarchies in society. Yet this dissertation has found that researchers can uncover valuable insights if they ‘invert’ this order of study and ask first how ‘micro and less visible forms of communication’ then play out into external systems (10). By investigating personal ideas and opinions, future studies can avoid making unqualified claims about entire groups of society based on external actions. The study of visible behaviors has its place in the social sciences, but it gains greater nuance when balanced by deeper analysis into the ideologies that guide them in the long run.

As philosopher and economist John Maynard Keynes once said, ‘I am sure that the power of vested interests is vastly exaggerated compared with the gradual encroachment of ideas. Not, indeed, immediately, but after a certain interval...’. It is the urgent task of the media and communications community to seek out these long, slow, quiet evolutions of thought that belie the most public of media and present them, bare of rhetoric, for the public awareness. Only then can society ask if it means to be going where it is going.



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