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This article articulates the fundamental nature of "legitimacy" to public relations research and sets forth actional legitimation as a productive new area for public relations studies. After tracing the development of the idea of "corporate legitimacy," this research distinguishes between institutional and actional legitimacy. Although institutional legitimacy has formed a basis for studies of crisis communication, image, values advocacy, and issue management, actional legitimacy studies allow for the study of more day-to-day public relations activities in which publics have a more immediate impact on corporate policy. The article concludes that actively studying strategies of legitimation for specific corporate policies would produce useful scholarship that builds on extant legitimacy literature.

When a commercial airplane carrying more than 200 passengers crashes into the Atlantic Ocean, crisis communication swings into action. The airline, the aircraft manufacturer, and government safety organizations begin the process of rebuilding fliers' trust in air travel. All kinds of organizations involved with air travel launch public relations campaigns comparing the relative risks of air travel with the risks of other types of transportation. The organizations involved seek explanations and pledge prevention of future disasters. The alacrity with which all of these groups create reassuring messages is absolutely necessary—at stake is the industry itself. If consumers suddenly felt that flying was extremely perilous, the airline and aircraft industries would crumble.

Crisis communication such as this aims at reestablishing the legitimacy of an industry (Hearit, 1995b). The practice of crisis communication recognizes the broadest sense of legitimacy—that is, an institution's need for publics to recognize

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its authority to operate and exercise authority in a broader social context (e.g., Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Epstein & Votaw, 1978). However, included in "legitimacy" are two distinct types: One, institutional legitimacy, has provided a basis for many areas of public relations research. The other, actional legitimacy, is promising as an important new site for public relations studies.

Sometimes a corporate activity concerns people, but not to the extent that they question the corporation's existence. Is it reasonable, for instance, for a huge multinational corporation to move some production from a plant in one city to a plant in another city? Should a corporation profit from a new food additive with occasionally unpleasant side effects? Is it appropriate for a corporation to extend benefits to unmarried partners of its employees? Publics' answers to these questions will likely not threaten corporations' existence. Their answers might, however, influence the means a corporation uses to accomplish its goals—Thomson Consumer Electronics might alter its severance package to American employees losing their jobs to workers in Juarez, Mexico; Procter & Gamble (P&G) might expand or reduce production of its fat substitute, olestra; Walt Disney World might choose to stand on principle in the face of boycotts or withdraw its new policies.

The difference between the airline crash and the other scenarios is the difference between institutional and actional legitimation. Corporations undertake actional legitimation when they attempt to demonstrate the legitimacy not of their entire enterprises, but of specific policies or actions. And although not all corporations will face crises requiring institutional legitimation, almost all will introduce on occasion new or controversial policies that require actional legitimation. After tracing the development of corporate legitimacy needs through history and scholarship from various fields, this article shows that legitimacy is a foundational concept of public relations studies. It then defines actional legitimation as an important area for study, distinguishing it from institutional legitimation and demonstrating its relevance even in the absence of a full-blown crisis or any crisis at all.

THE ORIGINS OF CORPORATE LEGITIMATION

The corporate desire for public legitimation has not always existed. Before this century, corporations had very little accountability to the consumer public, legally or otherwise. Product liability was not much of a consideration until after 1915, and most of the regulatory agencies that govern corporate activity today did not exist. But the "muckraking" investigative journalists of the early 20th century portrayed corporations as demons, prompting them to stop ignoring public concerns. Public relations historian Scott Cutlip (1994) argued that muckrakers helped create a need for all kinds of public relations by forcing "Big Business" to counteract somehow the negative publicity that it had up to that point avoided. Upton Sinclair's (1906) *The Jungle* exposed the unsanitary and oppressive labor conditions of the meatpacking industry at the fictitious Durham's in Packingtown. Two important exposés highlighted the corrupting influence of big business on politics: Lincoln Steffens's (1904/1948) *The Shame of the Cities* and David Graham Phillips's (1906/1964) *The Treason of the Senate,* which demonized "the interests" and prompted Theodore Roosevelt's "The Man With the Muck Rake" speech (1906/1995) criticizing the muckrakers and claiming a difference between good and bad trusts.

Ida M. Tarbell's (1904) *The History of the Standard Oil Company* and Standard Oil's response were another landmark in the development of public relations and the corporate need for public legitimacy. Due to the lax regulatory environment at the time, the publication of Tarbell's historic series of muckraking articles in *McClure's* magazine, "The History of the Standard Oil Company" (later published in book form), hardly intimidated Standard Oil.[1] At the time of Tarbell's writing, Standard Oil controlled through its holdings 114 other U.S. corporations that in turn processed, marketed, and exported over 80% of American crude oil (Bringhurst, 1979). From 1902 to 1905, Tarbell's articles credited almost every element of Standard Oil's monopolistic success, from production to refining to transportation, at least partly to some kind of unfair or illegal practice. Accustomed to standing out of public reach and headed by the billionaire Rockefeller family, the corporation remained silent. After years of public scrutiny and no significant public response by Standard Oil to charges of unfair shipping rebates and intimidation of small businessmen, the Supreme Court handed down the decision that broke the trust into 32 pieces, putting teeth into the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 and introducing a new impetus for corporate responsiveness to publics.

Since then, new regulatory agencies, greater competition, and increased public awareness have reinforced the idea that corporations do require some degree of public support. Hearit (1995a) observed that both maintaining and losing legitimacy are rhetorical processes. Corporations and scholars alike have long recognized that crises require legitimating responses. But crises should not stand as the only prompts for legitimation—policies that might generate controversy must generate legitimating discourse.

LEGITIMACY AND CORPORATE DISCOURSE

An institution is considered legitimate if publics perceive it to be responsible and useful (Epstein, 1972). As Gerald Turkel (1982) put it in exploring how Chrysler obtained federal loan guarantees in 1980, legitimating discourse justifies differences in power among social actors. Accepted as legitimate institutions, governments, corporations, and other large institutions are allowed by their publics to op-

[1]The first in a series of 21 articles about Standard Oil and John D. Rockefeller, Sr. (its enigmatic leader) was Tarbell's (1902) "The History of the Standard Oil Company, Chapter 1."

erate and exercise considerable authority and influence. In bringing together contributions to legitimacy theory from law, management studies, organizational communication, and public relations, this article examines the concept of legitimacy broadly, exploring competing definitions advanced by different fields and probing legitimacy's importance in public relations research. Then it carves a niche for the use of the term *actional legitimation* as it relates to corporate justifications for specific actions.

Institutional Legitimacy Theory

The term *legitimate* has been used to describe a variety of institutions that depend on the good will and approval of key publics to exist. The most established area of legitimacy theory has focused on political institutions. Stillman (1974) acknowledged that there is no consensus definition of legitimacy but generalized that "a government is legitimate if and only if the results of governmental output are compatible with the value pattern of the society" (p. 39). That is, legitimacy inheres in an institution that acts in accordance with public values. Francesconi (1982) echoed this conception of legitimacy in arguing that political legitimacy rhetorically tries to communicate actions so that they seem consistent with social values. An institution that acts in a manner inconsistent with those values becomes illegitimate and faces serious obstacles to continued existence. Politically, this could lead to electoral change, impeachment, or even rebellion. And although political structures can, of course, exist by force, institutions perceived to be legitimate receive a higher degree of cooperation than they would if compliance were gained through coercion (Turkel, 1982). Habermas (1989) described legitimacy as "a political order's worthiness to be recognized" (p. 178). Two of these political theorists, however, also issue questionable warnings. Stillman (1974) warned that legitimacy should not depend on public opinion; he feared that if it did, legitimacy would become simply a matter of which institution's propaganda is best or which institution "manipulates public opinion best" (p. 50). Habermas (1989) protested that only political orders can possess or lose legitimacy—"multinational corporations or the world market are not capable of legitimation" (p. 179). Based on scholarship that extends legitimacy theory to organizations, this article argues not only that corporations can gain or lose legitimacy, but also that the legitimacy of corporations and their actions depends significantly on the perceptions of corporate publics.

Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) agreed with political theorists that legitimacy involves the value or worth of an institution in the larger social system, but they averred that because legitimacy is a "conferred status," it is "always controlled by those outside the organization" (pp. 193–194). In this conception, then, publics alone decide legitimacy. Legitimation is a social process (Mazza, 1999). Other scholarship in organizational legitimacy builds on the foundation of political legitimacy but reflects this external orientation. Epstein and Votaw (1978) called organizational legitimacy a "condition that occurs with the congruence of organizational activities with social norms" (p. 72). Similarly, Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) defined organizational legitimacy as the degree to which organizational actions are congruent with norms of acceptable behavior in the social system. Ulrich (1995) saw legitimation as a component of a stakeholder model of corporate control, arguing that public legitimation forces a corporation to be accountable to the general public as well as to investors. Brummer's (1991) "social demandingness theory" states that corporations must act as the public demands or expects (p. 165). All of these conceptualizations of legitimacy focus on the organization as a whole; current legitimacy literature deals almost exclusively with the public's overall perception of an organization and its right, on balance, to exist.

Epstein (1972) actually implied not only that legitimation is possible for corporations, but also that it is more important for corporations than for government institutions, because private nongovernmental entities do not bear the same legal constraints as government institutions (p. 1701). Boulding (1978) agreed that corporations must clearly establish their legitimacy because, unlike governments, they explicitly operate to profit financially from their publics. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) also suggested that legitimacy is a bigger challenge for corporations than for governments, because private organizations' social worth is less apparent—they are by nature more self-interested enterprises. Seeger (1986) noted that any institution that depends heavily on its relationships with external publics is likely to emphasize legitimation strategies, and corporations' reliance on government, consumer, and community acceptance naturally makes legitimation a priority.

Stillman (1974) asked, "Who decides legitimacy" (p. 36)? Legitimacy cannot be established in isolation; the corporation's best efforts still must adapt and respond to the concerns of its publics (see J. E. Grunig, 1992; Ulrich, 1995). Allen and Caillouet (1994) wrote that legitimacy decisions are based on messages in "the public arena" (p. 56). Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) noted that organizations can only survive if they maintain a coalition of supportive stakeholders necessary for operation, and that means that the members of that coalition have legitimacy-determining power. For this stakeholder coalition to stay in place, corporations must legitimate what they do, demonstrating their usefulness and responsibility to the publics that allow them to exist and exert social influence. Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) reflected this understanding of legitimacy in suggesting three general approaches organizations can take toward legitimation: They can adapt their outputs and goals to social understandings of legitimacy; alter social ideas of legitimacy to fit their organizations' practices; or identify with symbols, values, and institutions that already possess strong social legitimacy (the last closely resembling Bostdorff and Vibbert's, 1994, values advocacy).

Another question raised about legitimacy is whether it is an all-or-nothing proposition (Epstein & Votaw, 1978). Brummer (1991) and Stillman (1974) both conceded that legitimacy exists in varying degrees, and Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) called legitimacy ambiguous and socially constructed. They noted that it is unclear what percentage of a social system must approve for an organization to possess legitimacy, but that the concept is definitely a social construction. In any event, legitimacy clearly does not demand unanimous agreement by publics. If it were necessarily complete and unanimously agreed on, all organizations would be considered illegitimate due to difficulty in reaching consensus among so many stakeholder groups. Thus, although legitimation does exist in varying degrees, it is socially constructed and controlled by publics, and a significant portion of interested stakeholders must confer legitimacy for it to exist.

Legitimacy and Public Relations Scholarship

The concept of institutional legitimacy, which requires publics' consent for corporate existence, forms a basis for many lines of study in public relations. In addition to grounding values advocacy, the idea that corporations depend on the goodwill of their publics (a "consent of the governed" for profit-making enterprises) is reflected in crisis communication studies, image scholarship, and issue management.

One public relations research tradition closely linked to legitimacy is crisis communication. In the aftermath of a crisis, however, companies can only reestablish their legitimacy with publics (Hearit, 1995b)—publics cannot exert much influence over corporate policy because the damage has already been done. Hearit's discussion of corporate apologia as a distinct type of discourse aimed at reestablishing a corporation's legitimacy makes the link between crisis communication and legitimation explicit, involving three cases in which a corporation's very existence was threatened due to a crisis. In such situations, corporations attempt to dissociate themselves from the wrongdoing and seek a return of institutional legitimacy. Actional legitimacy, in contrast, creates the possibility of corporate dialogue with its publics when those publics can still affect corporate policy before any crisis occurs.

The argument that corporations require public legitimation is implicit in corporations' crisis rhetoric—if they did not need legitimation from their publics, a crisis would not create an exigence requiring a rhetorical response (Bitzer, 1968). The study of crisis rhetoric (e.g., Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Benson, 1988; Hearit, 1994, 1995a, 1995b; Ice, 1991; Williams & Treadaway, 1992) examines corporations that have to defend themselves or use apologia to repair obvious mistakes. Benoit (1995a, 1995b) even advanced a theory of image restoration strategies based on crises at corporations such as Sears, Coca-Cola, Exxon, and Union Carbide. All of these critiques of crisis rhetoric share an emphasis on corporations' accountability to their publics.

Conversely, case studies involving noncorporate legitimacy have intersected with crisis communication research. Francesconi (1982) examined the relegitimation of the North Carolina judicial system after a crisis of public confidence, and Seeger (1986) argued that NASA's Challenger tragedy "reduced NASA's standing as a legitimate institution," largely because NASA is an organization so dependent on favorable "environmental relations" or interactions with various publics that support it (pp. 147–148). In terms of corporate legitimation, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) argued that CBS had to justify paying H. R. Haldeman for an interview to retain legitimacy for its standing as a news organization.

Crisis rhetoric tries to justify or explain what has already happened, but the study of actional legitimation examines corporate rhetoric that tries to gain legitimation for actions before or as they happen, when publics retain the most decision-influencing power. As Hearit's (1995a, 1995b) argument goes, corporations that make mistakes are expected to make amends. With corporate rhetoric before the fact, however, corporations seek feedback that just might help them avoid mistakes or conflicts with publics' wills. The study of actional legitimation takes the implicit argument for public legitimacy in studies of crisis rhetoric and makes it explicit, expanding it to more common and less catastrophic events than a huge oil spill or a factory explosion.

Image studies mark another point where communication scholarship has taken up this question in part. Benoit (1995b) broadly equated image with "reputation" (p. 89). Texaco, for instance, repaired its reputation after allegations of racial bias through a scapegoating "separation" strategy (Brinson & Benoit, 1999). As in the case of most legitimacy studies, image scholarship has focused on publics' overall perceptions rather than their reactions to specific institutional actions; image is diffuse, but actional legitimacy is focused. Cheney (1992) wrote that all organizations (particularly corporations) are increasingly interested in images, including both visual symbols and general impressions. Alvesson (1990) attributed this to the idea that rather than coming only from people's lasting experience and true understanding of a corporation, image is mediated through advertising and reporting. As a consequence, corporations perceive themselves to have some influence on the images of them that people hold. By influencing image, corporations build legitimacy. Alvesson defined image as "something affected by the intentions of particular actors (a company), for whom the image is singled out as a particular concept and target for instrumental action" (pp. 376–377). Moffitt (1994) added that people's images of corporations are merely temporary and often shifting (p. 160). To combat the shifting image, corporations work to maintain and burnish stable images. A consistently positive image lends legitimacy to a corporation, enabling it to better weather crises and making actional legitimacy easier to achieve.

Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994) examined how values advocacy helps strengthen corporate image. If tobacco company Philip Morris, for instance, can associate itself with something like the Bill of Rights, the enhanced image people have of the company might help establish institutional legitimacy that will help the company more easily gain support in its next crisis. The study of actional legitimacy, however, examines corporate rhetoric primarily involved not in image construction, but in gaining the support or approval of various publics for particular courses of action. Sometimes, the use of image might become a legitimation strategy for a specific action. A company might, for instance, appeal to its trustworthy image in the past as a reason for the public to support a controversial action. Conversely, a company with a particularly negative public image might try to distance itself from its historic image to garner support for a new course of action. Whereas image and image management techniques might serve as legitimation strategies, however, a public's power over corporations lies not as much in its approval or disapproval of a corporation's image as in the power of its disapproval of a specific course of action to either provoke government intervention or encourage the corporation to choose a different course.

Coombs (1992) connected legitimacy to issue management. In his study of a presidential task force, he suggested three different legitimacy demands in an issue management situation. Publics must perceive not only the public policy advocated to be legitimate, but also the issue managers and the issue itself. If any of those elements fail to gain legitimacy, the issue management effort is likely to fail. Because of the proactive discourse required by issue management (Heath, 1997), issue management overlaps some actional legitimation activities.

True challenges to institutional legitimacy are rare. In the political arena, the position of independent counsel faces questions about its continued existence. To a growing extent, tobacco companies must justify their existence in spite of the hazards of their product. Exxon's operations in Alaska after the Valdez accident came under serious scrutiny, and ongoing debate surrounds the acceptability of constructing nuclear waste dumps underground in the Nevada desert. In each of these cases, the very existence of the institution involved is in question—if the institutions fail to demonstrate their usefulness and responsibility to the publics affected, they will ultimately be eliminated.

Actional Legitimacy and Corporate Policy

If institutional legitimacy matters at a macrolevel of analysis, actional legitimacy matters at a microlevel of analysis. Most existing legitimacy theory focuses on the idea of institutional legitimacy or the continued existence of the institution as a whole. In contrast to this institutional type of legitimacy, Brummer (1991) suggested (with little elaboration) the concept of actional legitimacy. Unlike institutional legitimacy, his actional legitimacy deals with specific corporate actions. It is achieved when an action is in the corporation's domain of authority; will be performed appropriately, responsibly, and conscientiously; and will contribute to corporate goals and inspire public confidence. To maintain actional legitimacy on a case-by-case basis, corporations must justify omission of what is expected (such as a professional sports franchise not considering any minority candidates for management positions) as well as commission of something unexpected (such as a reduction in dividend). Ulrich (1995) supported this actional legitimacy idea with his concept of "corporate responsiveness," which is the corporation's ability to provide good reasons for its actions (p. 3).

Actional legitimacy concerns, however, are less cataclysmic and more commonly demanded than are concerns about a corporation's continued existence (Allen & Caillouet, 1994). This narrower application of legitimacy arises in ongoing issue management efforts, and its aim is not to gain approval for a corporation's place in the social structure, but to gain approval from critical publics for a specific corporate policy or activity. Corporations appeal to members of their publics to justify risky or controversial behavior, sell stock, change products or services, and gain approval and support of proposed corporate policies.

Actional legitimacy is not simply a new name for small crisis management. Certainly a failure to gain legitimacy for actions can lead to a crisis, but all kinds of organizational decisions require actional legitimation. If organizational rhetoric is about securing support (Crable, 1990), then actional legitimation is quintessential organizational rhetoric in a wide variety of noncrisis public relations situations, from changing the company name to altering product packaging to introducing a new retirement plan.

When corporations attempt to establish actional legitimacy, however, what exactly do they try to demonstrate? Actional legitimation involves the same two components that Epstein (1972) defined for institutional legitimacy: utility and responsibility. Although Habermas (1989) would protest the use of legitimacy to describe a corporation, he made a similar link between legitimacy and public interest, introducing this "reconstructive" equation: If a recommendation is legitimate, that recommendation is in the general or public interest (p. 204). Using Epstein's work as a basis, Hearit (1995b) called the two criteria "competence" and "responsible operation," both of which must merit community acceptance. He wrote that corporations rhetorically maintain (institutional) legitimacy by giving reasons for people to confer it on them.

Actional legitimation generally focuses on one of these two elements, with rare exceptions. When P&G introduced its controversial fat substitute olestra (brand name Olean), for instance, many people questioned whether it was useful or responsible. The fate of the consumer products giant did not depend completely on the success of olestra's introduction, but to try to gain actional legitimacy for the new product, P&G staged a "pseudo-event" (Boorstin, 1961/1987) that addressed the central questions. P&G invited a *Wall Street Journal* reporter to come over and cook with the new substance. The resulting article about olestra's taste and side effects (or lack thereof) helped make a case for both its usefulness and P&G's responsibility in producing it (Narisetti, 1997). In most everyday instances of actional legitimation, however, a corporation anticipates that its actions might be perceived as useful but irresponsible, or responsible but useless.

A corporation might elect to change its operating policies to foster a friendlier working environment. It might introduce flex time, more ergonomically designed workspaces, and other changes demonstrating responsibility to employee comfort. If these changes resulted in difficulty for customers, however, such as not being able to move around the facility as easily and not having the phone answered, many stakeholders (e.g., customers, management, shareholders) might respect the responsibility of the policy but question its usefulness.

When Delta Airlines became the first major airline to ban smoking on international flights, it faced an actional legitimation challenge due to the large number of fliers who smoke—they might see the policy as responsible in regard to secondhand smoke but not useful when they would not be allowed to smoke on a long flight. Delta's maintenance of the policy, along with the many other carriers who have followed suit, demonstrates that Delta's policy gained actional legitimacy.

The more common circumstance involves a useful action of questionable responsibility. Pharmaceuticals are useful, for instance, but some question whether expensive marketing practices that add significantly to drug costs are responsible.

In terms of much smaller organizations, most communities recognize the usefulness of farming. With the advent of "factory farms" for pork, however, involving a great number of hogs in a small space, waste lagoons create water quality questions as well as odors that might cause communities to question the responsibility with which farmers do useful things. In many rural communities, this has forced the farmers to engage in actional legitimation of their methods.

When ABC aired Barbara Walters's 2-hr interview with Monica Lewinsky, it too faced questions of the act's legitimacy based on responsible journalism. World leaders interviewed during prime time on newsmagazines often receive only 20 or 30 min—was a former White House intern really worthy of so much air time, especially so blatantly connected to the release of her new book? Thomson Consumer Electronics faced actional legitimation challenges when it announced plans to move its Bloomington, Indiana RCA television assembly facility (the last of its kind in the United States) to Juarez, Mexico. The response of Bloomington and Thomson employees resulted in minor concessions that made the policy more palatable. People did not question the savings that Thomson would reap from the move, but important publics questioned the responsibility of abandoning a community and a workforce with a long-term investment in the corporation.

Currently, Major League Baseball (MLB) is engaged in the early stages of an actional legitimation campaign. Several writers have reported that MLB is considering the sale of uniform space for advertisements. This would, no doubt, raise needed revenue for escalating player salaries and therefore be useful. But its commercializing effect on our national pastime, at least theoretically devoted to play and not work, could be perceived as very irresponsible indeed. To date, the media public and the sports fan public seem very negative about the idea, reporting has been derisive at best, and MLB already has been the brunt of jokes from columnists and pundits. Publics' reactions will ultimately contribute to the look of players' uniforms. And this ongoing actional legitimacy question demonstrates one of the beauties of actional legitimation: It occurs when public dialogue can still affect corporate actions. Rather than publics' responses to a crisis affecting corporate attempts at institutional relegitimation, publics' responses to actional legitimation actually affect corporate policies. The outcome of the baseball advertising question is but one of the many actional legitimation concerns faced by almost every corporation as it serves and interacts with its publics.

CONCLUSIONS

Epstein (1972) called for scholars from many fields to reformulate the concept of corporate legitimacy, blending "legal doctrine with those ever-changing socioeconomic realities" (p. 1717). In a later book, Epstein and Votaw (1978) suggested research probing how legitimacy connects economic institutions and social systems. The study of actional, and not merely institutional, legitimacy answers these calls. This article has offered two ideas to the study of public relations: the fundamental link between legitimacy and public relations, and actional legitimation as a new area of study.

Institutions, whether government, corporate, or otherwise, gain or lose legitimacy based on the perceptions of their stakeholders. In continuing to refine scholarship in corporate legitimacy, public relations scholars need to understand how corporations persuade publics that specific corporate actions are congruent with social norms. On an actional legitimacy basis, the central question of actional legitimation studies is, how do corporations gain publics' support for individual policies as useful and responsible?

Scholarship in political and organizational legitimacy has established an important foundation for the study of corporate actional legitimation. If institutional legitimacy is based on an organization's perceived competence and responsibility to publics' interests, then legitimation strategies will be those rhetorical tactics corporations use to establish these two elements that justify the profit-making existence of corporations. Because corporations depend so heavily on stakeholders such as investors and consumers, they should be even more responsive to legitimation requirements than other kinds of organizations.

An actional approach to legitimacy applies the foundation of responsiveness to publics to particular corporate policies. Whereas image studies examine organizations' broad reputations that are enhanced by techniques such as values advocacy, and whereas crisis studies look at relegitimation efforts, the study of actional legitimation will focus on how corporations gain support for specific, individual policies before or during these policies' implementation. Because of this conceptualization, a corporation with a positive public image might fail to legitimate a particular course of action, and vice versa. Additionally, institutional legitimacy might even become an argument for a controversial claim of actional legitimacy (e.g., "This particular act is responsible because you already believe that this company is responsible"). A lack of institutional legitimacy might also become a barrier to achieving a relatively noncontroversial actional legitimacy—"In spite of what you think of our company, we believe this policy is responsible and useful."

Finally, the study of actional legitimation will build on the premise of crisis communication that corporations require legitimacy, but it will examine legitimacy before an act rather than in its aftermath. Public relations scholars can study and teach how corporations establish specific policies to be useful and responsible with no crisis necessary.

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