

Flagrant Foul: An Analysis of the NWSL's Response to Allegations of Sexual Harassment,
Abuse, and Coercion

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Synopsis

Background

The National Women's Soccer League, or NWSL, is the top women's professional soccer league in the United States. The league was founded in 2012 following the collapse of the former professional league, the WPS ("NWSL"). In its inaugural season the NWSL fielded 8 teams, six of which still play in the now 12-team league. These teams include the Chicago Red Stars, Portland Thorns FC, Washington Spirit, OL Reign (formerly Seattle Reign FC), NJ/NY Gotham FC (formerly Sky Blue FC), and North Carolina Courage (formerly Western New York Flash) (Dubov). Out of concern for the viability of the league, U.S. Soccer, the governing body of soccer in the United States, managed the NWSL until 2020 (Peterson). The league played its first independent season in 2021.

Allegations of Abuse

In an article published by *The Athletic* on September 30, 2021, former NWSL players Mana Shim and Sinead Farrelly accused Paul Riley, then head coach of the North Carolina Courage, of sexual harassment and coercion (Linehan). Both Shim and Farrelly played for Riley from 2013 to 2015 during his time coaching Portland Thorns FC. However, Farrelly's accounts of coercion dated as far back as 2011 when she played for Riley's Philadelphia Independence in the WPS (Linehan and Strang). Both players recalled several incidents of inappropriate behavior by Riley. Farrelly recalled three separate instances she was coerced into sex with Riley. Shim recalled an incident in June 2015, when Riley requested Shim join him in his hotel room to review game film. When she arrived, Riley was wearing only his underwear. Shim subsequently left.

Shim shared her experiences with Farrelly and teammate Alex Morgan. On September 16, 2015, Shim sent an email to Thorns owner, Merritt Paulson, Thorns general manager, Gavin Wilkinson, Thorns HR director, Nancy Garcia Ford, and Riley that detailed his behavior. She forwarded the email to then NWSL commissioner, Jeff Plush. Shim and Farrelly were interviewed by Ford as part of an investigation conducted by the Thorns. On September 23, 2015 the Thorns announced they would not retain Riley for the 2016 season. Publicly, the Thorns' poor league record and Riley's desire to return to Long Island were cited as reasons for the move. By February, Riley was coaching in the NWSL again, this time for the Western New York Flash.

In March 2021, the NWSL implemented its first anti-harassment policy. In April, Shim sent an email to then NWSL Commissioner Lisa Baird asking her to address the initial 2015 investigation into Riley's behavior. She included a copy of the email sent to Paulson and others in 2015. Baird replied that the matter was investigated and she could not share any other information. In late April 2021, Farrelly sent a similar email detailing her experiences with Riley. Farrelly received a reply from NWSL HR saying the league would investigate. Farrelly received the same reply as Shim from Baird in May 2021.

The Response

The NWSL Players Association released a statement minutes after the article's publishing (NWSLPA). The Players Association expressed support for players like Shim and Farrelly who came forward but also expressed support for "the players who suffer in silence." Their statement included a list of demands: the initiation of an independent investigation into the

allegations, the suspension of staff in violation of the NWSL's anti-harassment policy, and the disclosure of practices that enabled Riley to be re-hired within the NWSL.

Hours after the article's publishing, the North Carolina Courage announced the termination of head coach Paul Riley, "following very serious allegations of misconduct (NC Courage)." At the same time, the NWSL shared a statement from Commissioner Baird. Her statement began, "I was shocked and disgusted to read the new allegations reported in The Athletic this morning (National)." That evening, U.S. Soccer released a statement that Riley's coaching license with the organization was suspended (U.S. Soccer).

Players across the NWSL took to social media to express their support for players and their anger at the league. On Twitter, Morgan responded to Baird's statement by sharing the email exchange between Farrelly and Baird from April 2021 (Morgan). Morgan's tweet effectively destroyed the NWSL's assurances that the league reacted swiftly to the allegations against Riley.

In the following days and weeks, reactions and responses would continue to pour in. On October 1, 2021 the NWSL announced the weekend's games would be canceled ("NWSL Announces"). Hours later the league announced it had accepted Baird's resignation (National 2). FIFA, the world's governing body for soccer, announced its judicial bodies would conduct a preliminary investigation ("FIFA Statement"). The next day, U.S. Soccer announced their own independent investigation would be conducted by former United States Attorney General, Sally Yates (Carlisle). By mid-October, the NWSLPA announced the league had met their demand to conduct a separate and independent investigation of the allegations (Kassouf).

The Yates Report

On October 3, 2022 U.S. Soccer released the full findings of its independent investigation ("U.S. Soccer Releases"). The Yates Report revealed that issues of abuse and misconduct in the NWSL were systemic. Not only did the teams, the league, and the federation repeatedly fail to respond when confronted with allegations of abuse, they did not institute measures to prevent and address the abuse (Yates 2). While leaders privately communicated about the need for protections, a culture of silence concealed misconduct and allowed abusive coaches to move throughout the league. The league and federation failed to speak when opportunities arose to correct the record.

The Outcome

Following the release of the Yates Report, teams across the league began announcing the firing of involved staff. New NWSL Commissioner, Jessica Berman released a statement supporting the moves ("NWSL Commissioner"). The evening of October 4, 2022 ESPN aired its E:60 documentary "Truth Be Told - The Fight for Women's Professional Soccer." The documentary detailed the history of the NWSL and the allegations of abuse across the league (Karson-Strauss). It included several interviews from players in the league, including Morgan and Shim. Former Commissioner Baird was interviewed as well. On December 1, 2022 Paulson announced his decision to sell Portland Thorns FC ("Announcement"). Paulson would not sell his MLS club, the Portland Timbers. The same day, Sportico reported Chicago Red Stars owner, Arnim Whisler would sell his majority stake in the team (Sportico). The NWSLPA's independent investigation is ongoing, but results are expected before the end of 2022.

Campaign Objectives

The NWSL's overall objective is to restore trust and confidence in the league. However, the NWSL is balancing multiple publics and an ongoing investigation complicates its objective. Once the NWSLPA's investigation is complete, the NWSL should be prepared to properly respond and act to rehabilitate its reputation.

NWSL Players: Players are the foundation of the NWSL. Without them, the league would not be able to field teams. The NWSL's objective is to earn the trust of its players and show them the league is capable of providing them with a safe and professional environment to play their sport. The league's apologies need to be met with action that will reassure players they are protected under its anti-harassment policy.

Fans: Fans who attend matches, purchase merchandise, and support teams are the financial engine of the NWSL. The league's objective for fans is to reassure them that the players and the game they love are safe. The league needs to offer transparency into operation decisions past, present, and future.

Sponsors: The NWSL's business model is built on sponsorship and ticket revenue. The NWSL's objective for sponsors is to reassure them that the league deserves their continued support. The league needs to offer sponsors evidence that players are safe and healthy, fans will continue to support the NWSL, and that the league's values align with its sponsors' values.

Team Owners: The valuations of NWSL teams and cost of expansion fees is rising each year. The NWSL's objective for team owners is to reassure them that the league is a healthy investment. However, the league must also communicate it will never tolerate abuse, by removing the owners who are complicit in silencing or disguising it. The NWSL should be transparent and honest with new team owners about the work they are doing to make the league safe.

Analysis

Main Point 1: Offer a Genuine Apology

Offering a genuine apology generates feelings of empathy in the minds of an organization's publics, thereby aiding in the reputational rehabilitation of the organization. Addressing the most affected public first, acknowledging actions that created harm, and meeting words with long-term action are some of the pieces that make up a genuine apology.

1a. Address Your Most Affected Public First

The first entity an organization addresses in its statements is an indication of its priorities. Therefore, in a crisis scenario, an organization needs to apologize to its most affected public first. This acknowledgement that the organization is determined to correct their mistakes with one (sometimes a few individuals) reassures other publics that they will be treated the same, thereby generating empathy for the organization and its rehabilitation efforts. Oftentimes, organizations fail by referencing their own struggles before those of their most affected public. This indicates to its public that the organization has the wrong priorities and it will fail to generate the empathy needed for its rehabilitation.

The NWSL's statement in response to the September 2021 article exemplifies the common failure to address the most affected public first. In her statement on September 30,

2021, former NWSL Commissioner Lisa Baird began by referencing her own struggle receiving the news of the allegations. By placing her struggles above players like Shim and Farrelly, who experienced abuse and harassment, the league communicated that its priority was its continued operation, not the health and safety of its players. The majority of the statement described the guardrails and reactionary steps the league was taking to report “new” allegations, while failing to mention the players who shared them. This lack of recognition communicated to all NWSL players that by failing to acknowledge the priority of a few, the league did not see making amends with any of the players as an important step. As a result, the NWSL failed to generate the empathy it needed from its stakeholders to help restore its reputation.

The Starbucks case exemplifies how successfully addressing the most affected public first can generate the empathy needed to rehabilitate the organization’s reputation. By addressing their apologies to the two men arrested inside the Philadelphia Starbucks across every statement the company released, Starbucks communicated to all of its publics that its priority was to make things right with the two men from the beginning. Publics responded positively to the company’s apologies, as evidenced when Good Morning America co-hosts George Stephanopolus and Robin Roberts praised Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson’s message to the two men after he appeared on their program. Although the NWSL and Starbucks cases took place across different industries and maintained different publics, the NWSL stands to learn the value of addressing their most affected public first, in order to generate empathy it can use to repair its reputation, just as Starbucks successfully did.

1b. Acknowledge the Action Behind the Harm

By acknowledging the role its actions played in creating the harm experienced by its public, an organization communicates that it is taking responsibility for the pain they feel. Doing so generates empathy for the organization involved, as stakeholders interpret the organization’s recognition as a signal of sincerity and change. However, when organizations apologize only for the pain felt by their publics, their lack of acknowledgement for their role in creating that pain is interpreted as irresponsibility, because the organization has not identified its actions as the errors it needs to apologize for.

Baird apologized for the pain players experienced in a statement announcing the cancellation of weekend matches on October 1, 2021. However, the NWSL’s publics did not interpret her words as sincere because Baird’s lack of reference to the specific actions that created the pain communicated an overall irresponsibility for it. Baird’s lack of acknowledgement communicated she did not recognize the league’s actions as the errors she needed to apologize for, meaning NWSL publics had little empathy for Baird’s handling of the crisis, and far less than what would be needed to begin repairing the reputation of the league. It is possible ongoing investigations are the reason Baird failed to reference any specific actions by the league. Therefore, once the NWSLPA investigation is complete, the NWSL will have one final opportunity to apologize and clearly acknowledge the actions that harmed its players. Only once the NWSL indicates a responsibility for its publics’ pain will its apologies feel sincere to its publics.

United’s Dragging case is another crisis response that exemplifies the power of organizations addressing both their actions and the harm experienced by their public in their apologies. After the public reacted with outrage to United’s early statements, the company adapted its communication strategy to include referencing the ways in which it had failed Dr. Dao in its statements apologizing to him. United’s earliest statements were irresponsible at best

because they inaccurately reflected the timeline of events which ended in Dr. Dao's forced removal from an aircraft and took no responsibility for how its corporate practices enabled his harm. Days later, United effectively changed its tone when in an interview with GMA, United CEO Oscar Munoz, acknowledged the company had not given its employees the proper tools, policies, and procedures to avoid the harming of Dr. Dao. Munoz's admission and specific reference to company failures communicated a responsibility that its publics had not heard from the United before. While United and Munoz would go on to face significant financial losses, United's adapted apologies were met with more empathy than their earlier statements. Although ongoing investigations at the time of Baird's statements may be the reason the league failed to acknowledge their actions, the NWSL should consider adapting their apologies in the future to acknowledge their role in the pain felt by players.

1c. Meet Words with Long and Continued Action

In the long-term, words run thin and organizations need to meet their apologies with actions that support the continuous change they are promising. Every action an organization takes is a display of intent to its publics, and the more evidence an action will address the underlying issues or damaged culture, the greater the evidence of commitment and care. Ultimately, supporting words with actions that indicate systematic changes displays a commitment to publics that is met with the empathy necessary to rebuild organization relationships and reputations.

The NWSLPA's ongoing independent investigation means the NWSL's promises to meet their words with action cannot yet occur. However, the league should begin to assess the recommendations made in the Yates Report in an effort to communicate their care for the players and their commitment to addressing the systemic issues the report uncovered. Several recommendations including mandating accurate disclosure of misconduct, the abolishment of league NDA practices, required annual training, and the annual review of player surveys, identify systemic issues concerning accountability, player safety, and transparency in the NWSL (Yates). The league will display a commitment and care for its publics by implementing and maintaining these long-term practices as soon as it is legally able. By upholding these practices into the future, the league's continued commitment to change will generate empathy in the minds of its publics that can be used to rehabilitate the league's relationships and reputation.

Again, the Starbucks case is one the NWSL should learn from as it prepares to meet its words with long-term actions that will address the underlying issues and damaged culture that have long impacted the league. By beginning multi-phase anti-bias training for all of its employees, Starbucks displayed a commitment to its public that it would address the underlying impact of racial bias at every level in its organization, helping to repair the reputation of the company. Starbucks also communicated a commitment to its publics when it announced that community leaders would externally advise the company on its long-term diversity and inclusion efforts, which culminated in nationwide store closures for mandatory diversity training. For years, Starbucks enjoyed consumer empathy in response to its efforts, which allowed the company to restore its reputation. Although the NWSL is awaiting the completion of an internal investigation before it can act as effectively as Starbucks, the league stands to learn the valuable lesson of meeting words with continuous actions over the long term.

Main Point 2: Listen When People Talk

People are an organization's greatest resource to anticipate a crisis because of their proximity to other employees, consumers, and management. Creating an info pipeline and scanning the environment are two of the ways organizations can use their people to keep themselves informed and aware of potential crises before they arise.

2a. Create an Info Pipeline

It is important to ensure that any concern an employee may have can reach the ears of an organization's upper management through appropriate and established channels. If this infrastructure isn't created, or if employees are unaware of its existence, valuable information and warnings go unshared because people fear retaliation and or feel their concerns will not be addressed. As a result, an organization is left doing damage control instead of preventing a crisis.

Shim struggled to identify a team HR contact or complaint procedure that would allow her to safely report her allegations to team and league leadership back in 2015. While Shim risked her safety and career to eventually email her concerns to various team leaders, many other players did not, effectively silencing more concerns that would have foreshadowed the NWSL's crisis. In fact, the NWSL operated without independent reporting lines and human resource functions until the adoption of an anti-harassment policy in April 2021, meaning the league did not have established infrastructure to collect and address players' concerns for over seven years. In addition, the league's lack of established and appropriate communication channels meant team leadership were under no obligation to address concerns with the NWSL's head office prior to the adoption of policies, and as a result, the league missed out on valuable information that would have prevented a crisis years before.

The importance of creating an info pipeline is also visible in the Lower Merion School District case. By failing to share a student intern's concern about the capabilities of the school district's laptop program with upper management, two district IT employees disregarded an important warning about a crisis the district would soon be confronted with. As a result, Harriton High School could not inform parents about the remote access camera capabilities of school laptops earlier, the issue at the heart of its crisis. Perhaps more similar to the NWSL case, there is also evidence from the Penn State case that illustrates the valuable information that organizations lose when their publics are afraid to report their concerns. Prior to the 2002 incident witnessed by an assistant graduate coach that would ultimately reach the ears of Penn State officials, there was another incident of alleged sexual assault witnessed by a Penn State janitor in 2000, which he shared with his supervisor and other employees. However, no party reported the assault to the authorities out of fear for their jobs, and university officials would not learn about the assault until the grand jury investigation was released in 2011. Had the school learned of former Penn State defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky's behavior prior to 2002, by establishing communication channels for publics to share their concerns, it is possible the university would have removed Sandusky from Penn State facilities far earlier and prevented the crisis almost a decade later.

2b. Scan the Environment

Organizations should also consider the voices of other parties that have close ties to their own organization because their experiences and perspectives can identify a potential crisis before it develops. It is also important to recognize the information that surrounding events, social topics, and cultures provide, which can aid in the identification of a crisis given the parties' often overlapping traits, influences, and publics.

The NWSL's unique management relationship with U.S. Soccer meant the league was closely tied to the Federation and its affiliated parties, which had raised concerns about the behavior of several NWSL coaches before. For example, U.S. Soccer received an anonymous email in 2018 alleging a coach in Riley's youth development academy inappropriately touched a minor; the complainant expressed fear for speaking out given Riley's continued rejection of player complaints and the unsafe environment he fostered (Yates). Had the league considered reviewing these concerns with U.S. Soccer prior to their identification in the Yates Report, the NWSL might have identified that systemic issues concerning player health and safety existed outside of its league, raising the possibility of issues plaguing the league itself. Given the NWSL's position as the top women's professional league in the United States, the league also failed to consider how the cultures of collegiate and youth soccer might inform the culture and issues it could face in its own organization. For example, the Yates Report revealed that a culture of tolerating abuse had its roots in youth soccer, leading players who played and rose through the system unable to perceive the abuse they faced in the league as particularly egregious (Yates). Had the NWSL listened to outside parties and scanned the environment of youth soccer, with which they had overlapping interest and publics, the league could have identified a culture of silence and abuse that warned of issues in its own league.

Similarly to the NWSL's case, the Penn State case involved other outside organizations and voices that, if approached, could have helped the university identify potential crises. Much like Riley's work with his youth development academy, former Penn State defensive coordinator Jerry Sandusky worked with young children as a part of his foundation, The Second Mile. As part of an agreement with the university, Sandusky was allowed to use Penn State facilities for his foundation, a relationship between organizations that the university should have monitored given its proximity to university resources. If university administration chose to look deeper at the resources and gifts Sandusky provided his victims, they might have identified small clues of Sandusky's abuse. Similarly to Riley's case, parents also played an important outside role in the Penn State case. In 1998, a parent reported a concern about Sandusky's behavior to university police. Had Penn State administrators spoken with the parents of Sandusky's 1998 victim, they could have investigated and put a stop to Sandusky's abuse much earlier. The unfortunate parallels between the NWSL and Penn State cases show the simple action of scanning the environment might have saved the organizations' public from further abuse.

Main Point 3: The Truth Will Always Come Out

While anticipating a crisis, dealing with crisis, and during rehabilitation, organizations should remind themselves that the truth will always come out. How an organization communicates the facts of a crisis internally and to its publics will come under fire if the organization's messaging is not accurate, further damaging its reputation and rehabilitation efforts. Speaking accurately and completely about bad news internally, addressing the problem before it becomes one, and telling the truth when defending itself are all ways an organization should communicate to protect its reputation when the whole truth is inevitably revealed.

3a. Never Hide or Disguise Bad News Internally

Occasionally, members of an organization purposefully fail to communicate with each other or manipulate the language of a complaint in order to convey a problem as being less serious than it is in an effort to protect themselves from present trouble. However, by masking the problem internally, the organization is allowing more harm to occur in the long-term, both to

its publics and its reputation, when news of the crisis is inevitably shared. In addition to the ethical concerns, disconnect between the facts and the communication of the truth is interpreted by consumers as a purposeful and deceitful omission that reflects poorly on the organization's reputation. All of an organization's internal communication should reflect bad news truthfully and in its entirety to prevent such reputational damage and the suffering of its publics.

By communicating inaccurately and incompletely about abuse allegations raised throughout its history, the NWSL sought to protect itself from negative attention that could jeopardize the future of the league. However, the NWSL's failure to speak accurately and completely about the allegations internally, perpetuated the harm experienced by players and allowed abusive coaches to move from team to team without punishment. For example, when Sky Blue FC expressed interest in hiring Riley for its head coaching position following his termination from the Thorns, former NWSL Commissioner Jeff Plush contacted U.S. Soccer officials writing, "[o]bviously [Riley's] situation is [] complicated" (Yates 69). When the Western New York Flash announced they would hire Riley to be their next head coach in February 2016, no one at the NWSL or U.S. Soccer communicated with the team about the allegations against Riley. When the NWSL's publics were made aware of the league's failures to appropriately communicate the allegations, they interpreted the league's actions as deceitful omissions that communicated the league's priority wasn't the health and safety of its publics, but its continued operation and public image. The league's lack of complete and accurate communication perpetuated the suffering of its publics, and the league experienced further reputational damage when the Yates Report was published.

The Penn State case is another example of an organization that masked a problem to protect its reputation but perpetuated the harm of its publics, eventually leading to greater reputational damage for the organization when news eventually broke. In 2002, a graduate assistant coach shared with Penn State football head coach Joe Paterno that he had witnessed Sandusky raping a child in the Penn State locker room. The next day, Paterno told Penn State athletic director Tim Curley, Sandusky was seen "fondling or doing something of a sexual nature to a young boy," language which seriously minimized the severity of Sandusky's behavior (Swann 408). After informing other members of Penn State's administration, no one reported the incident to police until an investigation began years later. In 2011, a grand jury report revealed that Penn State administration denied they were told about the severity of the incident, with Penn State president Graham Spanier testifying he was told Sandusky was seen "horsing around" with a child, language which again, minimized the harm experienced by Sandusky's victims (Swann 409). By failing to communicate accurately and completely about Sandusky's behavior, despite being aware of its severity, Penn State administrators enabled the continued harm of Sandusky's victims and displayed a purposeful and deceitful manipulation of the truth to protect their reputation. Ultimately, Penn State's publics were appalled when they learned of Sandusky's behavior, and the behavior of university administrators severely damaged the trust of its publics and the organization's reputation, which the school would work for years to repair. The Penn State and NWSL cases shows that disguising concerns internally perpetuates the harm of an organization's publics and damages its reputation in the long-term, despite what organizational leaders may be trying to avoid.

3b. Address the Concern Before It Becomes a Problem

One thing an organization can do to mitigate a potential crisis is to address a concern before it becomes a problem. By allowing a problem to fester, an organization is forcing itself on

the back foot later when news of the crisis becomes public. Publics interpret the organization's position as defensive, and its leadership as unfit to handle problems, further damaging its reputation in the minds of its publics. By addressing the concern early, an organization can frame itself as a proactive entity protecting its publics and maintain some of the confidence it would otherwise lose.

By failing to sufficiently address the concerns raised by players like Shim and Farrelly seven years ago, the league missed an opportunity to frame itself as a proactive entity protecting its publics, a position that would maintain confidence in the league when news of coaches' behavior inevitably surfaced. However, by using characteristics of its early operation, including a lack of resources, concerns of fragility, and a culture of silence, as an excuse, the league found itself on the back foot in September 2021, defending its position in the present although it had become clear that the league had always held the power to remove abusive coaches. Today, the NWSL's objective to restore trust and confidence in the league is a job made much easier if the league had addressed player concerns all those years ago. Instead, the NWSL failed to maintain confidence in the league and its leadership because it allowed its players' concerns to fester into real problems that were only revealed to the public years later.

The BP Case is another example of an organization failing to address a concern before it becomes a problem. Publics worried in 2006 that BP put profit before its people because of a series of incidents at BP refineries, pipelines, and oil wells that led to loss of life. BP paid \$21 million in fines for an explosion at its Texas City oil refinery and an additional \$50.6 million three years later after more safety violations were found. The increase in safety violations indicated a pattern of unsafe operation that BP allowed to fester, until weeks later when the crisis came to head on BP's Deepwater Horizon. By failing to address the systemic concerns for safety following incidents in 2006, BP could not frame itself as a proactive organization with its employees' safety in mind in 2010, a reputation that might have lessened some of the reputational damage the company faced during the Deepwater crisis. Instead, BP's choice to ignore concerns before they developed into problems forced the company into a defensive position in 2010 which damaged the public's trust in leadership and ultimately the company's reputation. Contrary to the NWSL case, BP's concerns were not raised by a few individuals, but by a series of deadly incidents that should have alerted the company to an eventual crisis. Yet, the principle that addressing concerns before they turn into problems is one way an organization can protect its reputation when news of a crisis is inevitably revealed remains the same.

3c. Tell the Truth When Defending Yourself

Another way an organization can protect its reputation when the truth is inevitably revealed is to use it when defending itself. While the truth may not always reflect nicely on the organization, the recognition of true events communicates to an organization's publics that it takes responsibility for the crisis, generating trust in the organization. Failing to communicate the truth when defending itself frames the organization as a liar because publics and consumers recognize the discrepancies they were told once facts become public. This damages trust in the organization and ruins its opportunities to repair its relationship with its publics and its reputation with consumers.

The NWSL failed to protect its reputation when Baird's words in her statement responding to the September 2021 article, contradicted the existence of an April 2021 email exchange with Farrelly, which NWSL forward Alex Morgan shared an hour after Baird's statement. By providing evidence that Baird was made aware of the allegations a month prior to

her statement, Morgan effectively framed Baird and the league as liars. NWSL publics and consumers recognized the discrepancies and their now damaged trust was met with outrage that the league believed it could get away with its lie. While the fact that the league was aware of the allegations would have damaged the reputation of the league further, failing to mention its knowledge in its own statement communicated to its public that the league did not take responsibility for the allegations, leading again to a damage in trust. By its own lie, the NWSL destroyed an opportunity to begin repairing its relationship and reputation with its publics because it damaged its publics' trust.

Another case that shows an organization's failure to protect its reputation by failing to tell the truth when defending itself was Komen for the Cure during its 2011 scandal. For years, Komen provided grant money to Planned Parenthood for its health clinics, but after Congress began investigating Planned Parenthood over its spending of public money, Komen instituted a new grant policy that made Planned Parenthood ineligible to receive Komen grants. In early statements defending itself, Komen stated its new policy was implemented to protect its donors' money. But the next day, Komen flipped its script and said the deciding factor to deny grant money to Planned Parenthood was because the clinics lacked direct diagnostic tools. The discrepancies between Komen's latest public statement and the apparent facts of the policy led to public mistrust over Komen's operations because the organization appeared to be resting the responsibility of Planned Parenthood's loss of funding on Planned Parenthood. By failing to stick to explaining itself using the words of its own policy, Komen damaged the reputation of its company and damaged its publics' trust, a relationship that years later, Komen was still trying to recover. While Komen would eventually return to its original messaging that the grant policy was designed to protect donor's money, both the NWSL and Komen exemplify how when organizations fail to tell the truth when defending themselves, they damage their relationships and reputation with publics because what they have ultimately damaged, is their publics' trust in them.

Main Point 4: The Power of the Documentary Frame (Against You)

Documentaries are powerful communication tools that give their creators ultimate control over the framing of an issue. Their accessibility and simple digestion make them an easy first stop for information for an organization's publics. Documentaries can allow complete visual control and selection of powerful figures to construct their frames in a way that is used against organizations on the other side of an issue.

4a. Complete Visual Control

One benefit of documentaries is the near complete visual control over an issue they provide their creators; this is especially powerful because visuals appeal to an audiences' emotions in a way that words never can. Select images, editing decisions, and lighting choices all effectively instruct audiences how to feel about a particular issue, making their minds much harder to sway by organizations who are left using more traditional messaging tools.

One reason for the NWSL's apparent failure to restore trust and confidence in the league was simply the success by other entities to take visual control of the narrative in a documentary. ESPN's E:60 documentary used past footage and b-roll of teams and players to provide a glimpse of conditions in the league that led to the development of systemic issues like player abuse. By including this visual evidence of player treatment, the documentary's creators gave NWSL publics images to latch onto that were far more powerful than simply hearing about the

treatment. The documentary's professionally staged interview settings, complete with several angles, also effectively primed viewers to lend players and interviewees the air of authority to speak on the serious issues at hand. By contrast, the documentary used its visual tools to frame NWSL leadership as foolish, asking Baird directly about the extent of her knowledge and keeping the camera on her as she raised eyebrows and fidgeted at the questioning. In all, the documentary's ability to establish complete visual control over the issue of abuse in the NWSL meant its message had resonated with NWSL's publics stronger than the league's written statements could ever match.

Blackfish is another documentary that successfully took visual control of a narrative to manipulate viewers' opinions on an issue. By using archival footage of killer whale training sessions to tell the story of the death of SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau, despite none of the footage being from the incident that led to Brancheau's death, *Blackfish* evoked powerful emotions in viewers as it introduced the stance that killer whales did not belong in captivity. SeaWorld's concern about the power of *Blackfish*'s visuals led the organization to send a detailed critique of the film's visuals to movie critics before the film's release, but reviews for the film were largely positive upon release. ESPN's documentary used far more b-roll in its presentation of the issue, but the principle that using visuals in documentaries is more powerful than the written statements of organizations, because of the strong emotions they evoke, is shared by the *Blackfish* documentary.

4b. Powerful Figures

A powerful figure is someone who has influence over another person's opinion because of any number of factors, including their relationship, personal experiences, or proximity to the issue. A benefit to documentaries is the curated selection of powerful figures used to influence an audience's incomplete opinion. Organizations' messages are rendered less impactful when the messages in the documentary are delivered by powerful figures from that very organization; meaning a documentary will often use an organization's own powerful voices against them. Again, this makes an organization's message, which is often consumed after because of a documentary's low barriers to understanding, less convincing.

Another success by ESPN's E:60 documentary was the collection of powerful figures used to influence viewers' opinions on the league's handling of the abuse and harassment allegations, which effectively used some of the league's own voices against them to lessen the impact of its rehabilitative statements. Given that the documentary was speaking largely to undecided publics of the NWSL, powerful figures in the documentary included NWSL players such as Morgan who fans' relationships with meant they trusted. Additionally, Shim spoke from a position of personal experience on the matters of abuse in the NWSL, and other figures such as Sunil Gulati and Cindy Parlow Cone, former and current U.S. Soccer President, spoke from positions of proximity to the issues. Finally, the documentary was effective in using Baird against the league and its rehabilitation efforts by forcing her to answer questions which could potentially further damage the reputation of the league. The documentary's choice to force these answers distracted viewers from considering the league's rehabilitative efforts following the crisis and lessened the impact of the league's assurances of change because its public was exposed to the documentary's frame first. In sum, ESPN's ability to frame the issue of abuse in the NWSL with powerful figures lessen the effectiveness of the NWSL's rehabilitation efforts with undecided publics because the easy consumption of a documentary ensures their message will reach these publics first.

Once again, *Blackfish* is another successful example of documentaries using their selection of powerful figures to influence an audience's incomplete opinion and undermine the impact of the reacting organization's message. By interviewing former SeaWorld employees, whose personal experiences working for the organization and proximity to the killer whale issue, qualified them as powerful figures, *Blackfish* used SeaWorld's own powerful voices against itself, weakening the organization's claims that the practice of keeping killer whales in captivity was safe. Although ESPN's documentary included more interviews from typically more recognizable athletes, like Morgan, both documentaries employ the principle that using the voices of powerful figures detracts from the strength of the opposing organization's message.

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