FIGHTING WITH THE FOURTH ESTATE: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ORGANIZATION–MEDIA RIVALRY FOR NARRATIVE CONTROL FOLLOWING A TRANSGRESSION

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In this article, I develop a theoretical framework to explain *rivalry for narrative control* between members of the media and transgressing organizations. I do so by integrating and advancing key insights from competitive dynamics and crisis management research. The first part of this framework conceptualizes the unique tensions, actions, and reactions that characterize rivalry for narrative control following organizational transgressions and distinguish it from other forms of rivalry. The second part of the framework conceptualizes the role of both journalists' and organizational leaders' perceptions in shaping actions and reactions during rivalry for narrative control. This framework contributes to competitive dynamics research by further conceptualizing how rivalries between dissimilar actors materialize. This framework also broadens research on crisis management following transgressions to account for the potentially rivalrous nature of organization–media relations.

When organizations transgress and their legitimacy is threatened, they often wrestle with media outlets to control the narrative about their transgression. Narratives about transgressions develop over time to shape stakeholders' (i.e., audiences') understanding of what happened (i.e., plot and context), who was involved (i.e., characters), and what should be done (i.e., moral of the story) (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Mitchell, 1981; Scholes, 1980; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, & Reger, 2017). For example, when CNN released the *Blackfish* documentary in 2013, it began a seven-year battle with SeaWorld to control the narrative about the theme park's training practices and treatment of marine animals. Such rivalry carries significant consequences for transgressing organizations and the media outlets that engage with them. For organizations, it may influence the effectiveness of their reintegration efforts and provoke changes to policies, practices, and personnel (Pfarrer, DeCelles, Smith, & Taylor, 2008). In the example above, SeaWorld replaced its CEO, implemented costly policy

changes, and its stock price dropped by 45%—all during the year following the documentary's release (Solomon, 2014). Likewise, wins or losses may enhance or erode a journalist's status, while the audience engagement generated by the rivalry may boost an outlet's revenues (Core, Guay, & Larcker, 2008).

Competitive dynamics research has recently begun to explore rivalries between dissimilar actors for nonmarket ends (Markman, Waldron, & Panagopoulos, 2016; Pacheco & Dean, 2015). The objectives of this framework are to reconceptualize organization–media relations as potentially rivalrous, distinguish organization–media rivalry from other forms of rivalry, and inform richer exploration of organization–media interplay following transgressions. To do so, I conceptualize the unique tensions, actions, and reactions that characterize organization–media rivalry following transgressions and consider the factors that trigger and sustain this latent form of rivalry between dissimilar actors. The importance of developing this framework rests on the importance of managing the narrative in post-transgression contexts (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Pfarrer et al., 2008; Wang, Reger, & Pfarrer, 2021; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Shapiro, 2012), as well as calls for competitive dynamics research into unique forms of rivalry between dissimilar actors (Chen & Miller, 2012; Waldron, Navis, Aronson, York, & Pacheco, 2019).

The theoretical framework developed here, consisting of two parts, integrates advances in nonmarket competitive dynamics (Markman et al., 2016; Waldron et al., 2019) with research on post-transgression crisis management and media coverage (Pfarrer et al., 2008; Zavyalova et al., 2012). The first part characterizes the tensions, actions, and reactions that typify rivalry between media outlets and organizations following transgressions (Chen & Miller, 2012). I posit that media outlets and transgressing organizations alike may desire to control the narrative presented to stakeholders, but often seek to steer the narrative in opposite directions, creating tension. These tensions may give rise to critical media coverage and crisis response strategies, which represent rivalrous actions and reactions.

The second part of the framework draws upon journalism and crisis management research to conceptualize a multistage model of *rivalry for narrative control*. Within this model, I consider the perceptions of journalists and organizational leaders that may catalyze those tensions into rivalrous actions and reactions, thereby initiating or sustaining a battle for narrative control about a transgression. To aid in my conceptualization, I draw upon well-known examples of post-transgression organization–media rivalry for narrative control. In Table 1, I provide a selection of Pulitzer Prize-winning stories that exhibit the effects of post-transgression rivalry on commercial and noncommercial organizations. Throughout this article, I reference stories from Table 1 along with other examples of organization–media exchanges to demonstrate the relationships outlined in the framework. Of note, I use the terms "organizations" and "leaders," instead of "firms" and "managers," to expand this framework beyond the commercial entities that competitive dynamics research typically examines. Noncommercial entities such as governments, public agencies, nonprofits, charitable organizations, and other loosely organized activist or interest groups also commonly engage with the media about their transgressions, and therefore fall within the scope of this framework. Leaders in these organizations may include executives and board members from commercial organizations, government officials in governmental or public agencies, and even directors or organizers in other noncommercial entities.

In reconceptualizing organizations and the media as potential rivals following transgressions, this theoretical framework contributes to competitive dynamics research in two primary ways and makes a noteworthy contribution to crisis management research. First, this framework recognizes that latent rivalries between dissimilar actors may materialize when situational conditions create temporary tensions between the two parties. Specifically, it suggests that organization–media rivalry might arise over a sociocognitive resource (i.e., narrative control) that manifests only in certain situations (e.g., following an organizational transgression). Second, this framework enriches competitive dynamics research by establishing that organizations engage in rhetorical battles to influence stakeholder perceptions about their legitimacy. This adds to the expanding literature on alternative competitive actions that involve persuasive communication (Gao, Yu, & Cannella, 2017; Rindova, Becerra, & Contardo, 2004). Lastly, in terms of the crisis management literature, this framework broadens the investigation of organization–media interplay following transgressions by developing an alternative theoretical mechanism to account for previously underconceptualized behaviors. I propose that competing for control of the narrative about a transgression might be a motivation for organizations' crisis management efforts, which represents a deviation from stakeholder theory-focused frameworks that dominate the crisis management literature (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short, & Coombs, 2017). As a result, this framework may account for additional variance in crisis response strategies beyond that of existing crisis management frameworks.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Prior research on competitive dynamics largely examines rivalrous activities between two firms in a particular market (Chen & Miller, 2015). Early competitive dynamics research studied the interplay of competing firms' rivalrous actions as they pursued market advantage (Chen & Miller, 2012) both in consumer markets and resource markets (Capron & Chatain, 2008; Chen, 1996; Markman, Gianiodis, & Buchholtz, 2009). This work recognizes that firm attributes influence rivalry between competing firms as they pursue market advantages (Baum & Korn, 1996; Chen, 1996; Chen & Miller, 2012; Silverman & Baum, 2002). For instance, larger firms tend to take more significant visible actions against rivals than smaller firms (Chen & Hambrick, 1995).

A parallel stream of competitive dynamics research has emerged that explores how the actions and responses of firms engaged in rivalry are influenced by their managers' perceptions (Chen, 1996). Researchers have recognized the

TABLE 1
Selection of Recent Pulitzer Prize-Winning Stories About Transgressions by Organizations

Year	Organization	Media outlet	Summary of the transgression	Resulting changes to the organization
Commercial				
2018	Multiple entertainment production companies	*The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* (22 articles)	Sexual abuse of women in these companies by powerful men	Perpetrators were prosecuted and new interorganizational policy guidelines were implemented
2016	Multiple U.S. seafood suppliers	Associated Press (9 articles)	Severe labor abuses, including the use of slave labor	Perpetrators were prosecuted and policies reformed to prevent further abuses
2013	Wal-Mart	*The New York Times* (2 articles)	Wal-Mart's operations in Mexico engaged in large-scale bribery scheme	Policy changes within the company that address corruption issues
2011	Multiple property insurance companies in Florida	*Sarasota Herald-Tribune* (9 articles)	Insurance companies that were not financially viable insuring a large portion of homeowners	Requirements for insurance companies reformed by the state insurance commissioner
2010	Multiple natural gas producers in Virginia	*Bristol Herald Courier* (16 articles)	Royalty payments to owners of natural gas wells went unpaid or were held in escrow	Natural gas producers were forced to pay royalties and escrow accounts were released
Noncommercial				
2019	State of Louisiana	*The Advocate*, Baton Rouge (10 articles)	Discriminatory conviction policies, including the use of Jim Crow-era split-jury law for certain felony cases	Amendment added to Louisiana constitution that requires unanimous jury conviction for felony cases
2014	National Security Administration (NSA)	*The Guardian US* and *The Washington Post* (34 articles)	Widespread surveillance by the NSA on citizens and noncitizens	Changes in disclosure policies concerning data collection
2012	Washington State Pharmacy and Therapeutics Committee	*The Seattle Times* (3 articles)	State agency forcing pain management patients onto methadone causing hundreds of deaths among Medicaid patients	Changes to state enforced pain management policy

tension that managers perceive to exist as an antecedent of their firms' responses to rivals' actions, uncovering a positive association between tension and response likelihood (Chen, Su, & Tsai, 2007). "Tension" in this context refers to the "strain between a focal firm and a given rival that is likely to result in the firm taking action against the rival" (Chen et al., 2007: 101). An "action" represents a "specific and detectable market move initiated by a firm, such as introducing a new product or entering a new market, to erode a rival's market share or reduce its anticipated returns" (Chen & Miller, 2012: 141). Tensions, actions, and subsequent reactions constitute core constructs related to rivalry and are of central interest in this framework.

Tensions are a necessary, but not sufficient on their own, condition for competitive action and reaction. Researchers in this area argue that the conversion of tension into action and reaction may be predicated on motivating factors (Chen, 1996; Chen et al., 2007; Waldron et al., 2019). Managers are more likely to act or react when they perceive instrumentality and valence in reacting (Chen, 1996). When considering possible actions or reactions, factors that heighten managers' motivation to engage with rivals serve to catalyze tension into response. For

instance, prior findings indicate that rivals' similarities and prior rivalrous interactions increase the likelihood of further rivalry, as do competitors' motivations to achieve supremacy (Kilduff, Elfenbein, & Staw, 2010).

Departing from research concerning rivalry between firms, scholars have begun to explore rivalry between firms and dissimilar actors for nonmarket ends, which overlaps conceptually with the framework developed here (Markman et al., 2016; Waldron et al., 2019). To date, this research has largely focused on firm–activist interplay, wherein the two parties engage in a form of sociocognitive rivalry conceptualized as "values-based rivalry" (Waldron et al., 2019: 801). "Values-based rivalry" involves activists and firms each attempting to establish their preferred set of values as supreme in order to exercise control over the firms' practices. This research suggests that attributes of activists, their arguments, or the context in which the activism takes place can determine the effectiveness of activists' claims (Pacheco & Dean, 2015). In a similar vein, following transgressions, organizations and members of the media may engage in a similar form of sociocognitive rivalry: rivalry to control the narrative accepted by stakeholders about the organization's transgression.

Although competitive dynamics research has considered rivalry between dissimilar actors, it has not yet fully captured the process whereby these rivalries emerge and terminate. The potentially adversarial nature of the organization–media relationship following transgressions (Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015; Pfarrer et al., 2008) suggests that using a competitive dynamics lens could help researchers understand the two parties' rivalrous behaviors. Furthermore, because organizations and media outlets only engage one another under certain circumstances (Clayman, Heritage, Elliott, & McDonald, 2007), considering organization–media rivalry might advance our understanding about how latent rivalries between dissimilar actors transpire. Dissimilar rivals do not tend to have longstanding rivalrous relationships, and their rivalries do not tend to continue in perpetuity like commercial rivalries do (Chen & MacMillan, 1992; Rindova et al., 2004). Therefore, conceptualizing the process whereby contests between dissimilar parties emerge and conclude might further our understanding of these types of rivalries. My objective is to develop a framework that resolves these conceptual and explanatory constraints and establishes a theoretical foundation for rivalry between organizations and the media following transgressions.

CONCEPTUALIZING RIVALRY BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS AND THE MEDIA

The first part of this framework reconceptualizes tensions, actions, and reactions (Chen & Miller, 2012) to describe the unique rivalry between organizations and media outlets following transgressions. I establish that these core concepts of rivalry take different forms during post-transgression organization–media rivalry than they do during market-based rivalry between two firms. In doing so, I contrast the forms of control sought during market-based rivalry with the forms of control sought by organizations and the media following transgressions, which create unique sources of tension. I also compare the distinctive forms of action and reaction that organizations and the media take following transgressions to those taken by firms engaged in market-based rivalry. In developing this theory, I draw upon research from various domains that have traditionally examined post-transgression stakeholder-management strategies (e.g., crisis communication, corrective actions, rhetorical strategies, organizational accounts, and public relations) described henceforth as "crisis management research." Drawing on crisis management research to enrich the competitive dynamics literature bolsters the ability of both domains to explain the interplay between media outlets and organizations seeking to control narratives about transgressions, thereby fulfilling calls for interdisciplinary theory development (Durand, Grant, & Madsen, 2017).

Sources of Tension Between the Media and Organizations Following a Transgression

A core tenet of the conceptualization of tension in competitive dynamics research is that it exists when firms seek control of the same share of a market or resources (Chen et al., 2007). Implicit in this conceptualization are the potential consequences of winning or losing control over the market for consumers or resources, which involve substantial gains or losses to overall firm performance. Similarly, crisis management research indicates that, following transgressions, media outlets and organizations seek to control the message that is presented to stakeholders (Zavyalova et al., 2012). Following a transgression, organizations and media outlets may experience temporary rivalrous tensions with one another, due to the reciprocal implications of winning or losing control over the message presented to stakeholders. When this occurs, the organization's transgression creates the necessary situational conditions for a latent rivalry between the two dissimilar parties

to materialize. Thus, a transgression expands the competitive landscapes for transgressing organizations and media outlets such that they temporarily overlap (Withers, Ireland, Miller, Harrison, & Boss, 2018).

Whereas rival firms seek control over common *objects* (e.g., market share and resources), members of the media and transgressing organizations seek to control the *narrative*, which plays a large role in shaping stakeholders' perceptions. A "narrative" is an account of a series of related events that communicates noteworthy information to an audience, such as what happened, why it happened, when it happened, who was involved, and what should be done (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Mitchell, 1981; Scholes, 1980). To the extent that an audience accepts a narrative, the information the narrative presents can shape a wide array of audience perceptions about the events, characters, and prescriptions the narrative describes (Bishop, Treviño, Gioia, & Kreiner, 2020; Boje, 2014; Davis, 2002; Klein & Amis, 2021; Zavyalova et al., 2017). Both parties ultimately seek to reshape elements of the narrative to persuade stakeholders whether they should pay attention to the transgression, and whether they should revoke or restore the organization's legitimacy (Heath, 2000; Pfarrer et al., 2008). However, multiple competing versions of a narrative can exist simultaneously, and a narrative can change as events unfold and new information is presented to the audience by various parties (Benford, 2002; Jones, Shanahan, & McBeth, 2014).

Media outlets may seek control of the narrative for both economic and institutional reasons (Graf-Vlachy, Oliver, Banfield, König, & Bundy, 2020; Roulet & Clemente, 2018), which may motivate them to steer the narrative toward an unflattering storyline for the transgressing organization. First, media outlets are economically incentivized to attract public attention, and controlling the narrative may give them the ability to generate public interest. A narrative that downplays the impropriety of an organization's transgression and minimizes stakeholder concern (i.e., the transgressing organization's preferred narrative) may be less likely to attract public attention than a scandalous story that highlights impropriety and maximizes stakeholder concern (McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 2013; Trussler & Soroka, 2014). Thus, journalists may seek to control the narrative because it allows them to generate public interest and increase engagement, whereas failure to control the narrative might be a missed opportunity to increase engagement.

Second, the media plays an institutional watchdog role with an obligation to fact-check and provide their audience with accurate information (Hanitzsch, 2011; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017). If journalists do not believe that information provided by an organization is accurate, then their watchdog role identity may oblige them to step in and attempt to seize control of the narrative to ensure stakeholders receive truthful and reliable information (Livengood & Reger, 2010; Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). For example, in the NSA surveillance story from Table 1, the government agency explicitly claimed that they were not engaged in widespread data collection on American citizens, but journalists at *Guardian US* and *The Washington Post* were able to uncover and present information demonstrating that the NSA was, in fact, doing so. When members of the media expose misinformation about a transgression, their audience often confers status to them in return (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013).

In addition to their role as watchdogs, media outlets often play the institutional change agent (or interventionist) role by affecting positive changes in transgressing organizations (Hanitzsch, 2011; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017; Márquez-Ramírez et al., 2020). When stakeholders revoke legitimacy, it creates social pressure on the organization to realign its behavior with social norms and expectations (Deephouse, 2000). Media outlets can amplify this process by highlighting the organization's behaviors that conflict with social norms and exposing those inconsistencies to a broader audience, thereby intensifying the transgression's delegitimizing effect (Deephouse, 2000; Desai, 2014; McDonnell & King, 2013). The media can often intensify delegitimization to the extent that transgressing organizations change practices, policies, and personnel in ways that they would not have otherwise (Desai, 2011). When this occurs, stakeholders, the media outlet's audience, and the general public often credit the outlet with goodwill, bestowing status and awards upon those outlets or specific journalists for their efforts (Deephouse, 2000; Durand & Vergne, 2015; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013).

A transgressing organization's desire to control the narrative stems from its motivation to minimize or reverse damage to its legitimacy (Bundy et al., 2017; Dirks, Lewicki, & Zaheer, 2009; Elsbach, 1994; Pfarrer et al., 2008; Zavyalova et al., 2012). When organizations lose legitimacy, not only is their institutional status threatened, but stakeholders may also withdraw from the organization, which can negatively impact economic performance and access to resources (Eesley & Lenox, 2006; Frooman, 1999; Suchman, 1995). To avoid delegitimization, organizations often

attempt to influence the narrative through the use of rhetoric, which is a means of inducing stakeholder cooperation by manipulating their perceptions about legitimacy (Burke, 1969; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005). Importantly, organizations' rhetorical strategies comprise persuasive speech or arguments as well as any substantive actions that supplement the persuasive communication (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

Although rivalry for narrative control does not always conclude with a clear, widely accepted narrative about the transgression, organizations or adversarial media outlets may achieve supremacy when a collective audience accepts the narrative that they promote. Oftentimes, media outlets and organizations exchange rivalrous actions and reactions that leave the collective audience confused (or split) about which version of the narrative they accept. In these cases, there is no clear "winner" in the rivalry. In other cases, one side achieves control over the narrative and the collective audience comes to accept their version of what happened, who was involved, and what should be done. When this occurs, the side that defines the widely accepted narrative has "won" the exchange. Importantly, even if an organization or media outlet has facts and evidence on their side, it may not guarantee their victory. In considering an organization's legitimacy and the penalties that stakeholders might impose on it following a transgression, objective facts about the transgression only matter to the degree that they factor into the widely accepted narrative about the transgression.

Rivalrous Actions by Media Outlets and Organizations

Competitive dynamics research contends that actions and reactions between rival firms involve tactics for controlling the consumers and resources necessary to attain advantage in a shared market (Chen & MacMillan, 1992). Without explicitly recognizing narrative control as the outcome of interest, crisis management research describes a number of tactics used by organizations as well as attributes of media coverage that influence stakeholder perceptions. This research may help elucidate the unique nature of actions and reactions taken by media outlets and organizations to control the narrative about a transgression.

Rivalrous media actions. Scholars have recognized several important attributes of media coverage about organizational transgressions that contribute to its rivalrousness. Media coverage might take the

form of articles in newspapers, segments on broadcast media, or media stories (i.e., multiple articles or segments over time). Foremost, for the media coverage to be rivalrous, its tone must be critical of the organization or its behavior. "Tone" refers to "the level of support for an organization" expressed by the media (Carroll & Deephouse, 2014: 84). Media coverage that portrays an organization favorably serves to influence the narrative about the organization's transgression in a way that is consistent with the organization's objectives. Such coverage is cooperative instead of competitive, and therefore outside the scope of this framework. Thus, if considered on a continuum of negative (-1) to neutral (0) to favorable (1), only media coverage that falls on the neutral-to-negative side of the continuum would qualify as a rivalrous. Moreover, as media coverage moves further along the negative end of the continuum, the more rivalrous it becomes (Vergne, Wernicke, & Brenner, 2018).

In addition to tone, content is an important attribute that may determine the rivalrousness of media coverage (Carroll & Deephouse, 2014). Given the form of rivalry examined within this framework (i.e., narrative control), specific narrative-shaping content within the media coverage of a transgression may also contribute to the coverage's rivalrousness (Ettema & Glasser, 1988). Media coverage that makes specific claims about what happened, who was involved, and what should be done aims to shape the narrative about the transgression and, in doing so, shape stakeholders' perceptions of the organization. For example, in the 2018 Pulitzer Prize-winning story about sexual abuse of women in the entertainment industry (see Table 1), articles in *The New Yorker* and *The New York Times* documented harmful behaviors of well-known individuals at specific entertainment production companies. If the story had not contained this narrative-shaping content, and instead simply highlighted the mistreatment of women in society or show business in general, then it would not be considered rivalrous for the purpose of narrative control about an organization's transgression.

Rivalrous organizational reactions. Crisis management research recognizes that organizations often take extreme measures to present themselves favorably to stakeholders following a transgression. These measures comprise two broad rhetorical strategies (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005; Waldron, Fisher, & Navis, 2015) that organizations use to influence narratives about transgressions. Using the first type of rhetorical strategy, organizations attempt to combat

an unfavorable narrative by convincing stakeholders that the transgression does not warrant delegitimization, a strategy hereafter referred to as "defensive rhetoric." Using defensive rhetoric, organizations may attempt to persuade stakeholders that the transgression was not so bad and does not warrant penalties to the organization's legitimacy (Elsbach, 1994). By creating this narrative, the organization makes stakeholders doubt the severity of the transgression and whether the organization deserves penalties at all (Benoit, 1995).

Organizations tend to rely solely on crisis communication when they seek to combat an unfavorable narrative using a defensive rhetorical strategy (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Prior crisis management research has thoroughly considered organizations' accounts of their transgressions as a crisis communication mechanism, which can be powerful in conveying that the transgression does not warrant delegitimization (Elsbach, 1994). Within their communications, organizations may express sentiments ranging from justification, denial, and explanation, to obfuscation (Benoit, 1995; Elsbach, 1994). Each of these sentiments serves to influence stakeholders' perceptions and convince them that delegitimization is not warranted (Elsbach, 1994). Similarly, organizations may use crisis communication tactics such as blaming an external party, attacking the accuser, or portraying themselves as a victim within the narrative to elicit a sympathetic response from

stakeholders (Coombs, 2014; Holladay, 2010; Park, Park, & Ramanujam, 2018). Such was the case in November of 2019 when Frederick Smith, chairman and CEO of FedEx, issued a statement attacking *The New York Times* in response to an article it published about FedEx's lobbying for and use of federal corporate tax breaks. In his statement, which is displayed in Figure 1, Mr. Smith cultivated a counternarrative to the article by attacking the accuser, denying any wrongdoing, and attempting to change the conversation to capital investment and economic development, all of which served to shift the narrative in a way that was favorable for FedEx (FedEx Newsroom, 2019).

Alternatively, organizations may use a second type of rhetorical strategy, which I refer to as "conciliatory rhetoric," in their attempts to redirect an unfavorable narrative. Using this strategy, an organization accepts that a delegitimizing problem did exist, but, because of substantive corrective actions that the organization has taken, the problem has been fixed and their legitimacy should be restored (Hersel, Helmuth, Zorn, Shropshire, & Ridge, 2019). Transgressing organizations may take corrective actions such as changing policies and practices, or removing problematic leaders and employees (Gangloff, Connelly, & Shook, 2016; Vlad, Sallot, & Reber, 2006). Alternatively, organizations may offer various forms of recompense to stakeholder groups affected by their transgression to demonstrate that

FIGURE 1
Statement from Frederick W. Smith About Article in *The New York Times*

November 17, 2019

The New York Times published a distorted and factually incorrect story on the front page of the Sunday, November 17 edition concerning FedEx and our billions of dollars of tax payments and billions of dollars of investments in the U.S. economy. Pertinent to this outrageous distortion of the truth is the fact that unlike FedEx, the New York Times paid **zero** federal income tax in 2017 on earnings of $111 million, and only $30 million in 2018 – 18% of their pretax book income. Also in 2018 the New York Times cut their capital investments nearly in half to $57 million, which equates to a rounding error when compared to the $6 billion of capital that FedEx invested in the U.S. economy during that same year.

I hereby challenge A.G. Sulzberger, publisher of the New York Times and the business section editor to a public debate in Washington, DC with me and the FedEx corporate vice president of tax. The focus of the debate should be federal tax policy and the relative societal benefits of business investments and the enormous intended benefits to the United States economy, especially lower and middle class wage earners.

I look forward to promptly hearing from Mr. Sulzberger and scheduling this open event to bring further public awareness of the facts related to these important issues.

Source: FedEx Newsroom (2019).

they have paid a price for their transgression (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2009). Notably, when utilizing a conciliatory rhetorical strategy, organizations tend to supplement their corrective actions with crisis communication to convey to their audience of stakeholders that they are fixing the underlying problem (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). For instance, organizations may attempt to reconcile with stakeholders by apologizing, repenting, and offering sympathy (Holladay, 2010; Verhoeven, Van Hoof, Ter Keurs, & van Vuuren, 2012).

A key difference between defensive and conciliatory rhetorical strategies lies in the resource outlays required for crisis communication versus corrective action. Corrective actions tend to involve a considerable resource commitment, whereas crisis communication does not. The typical cost of crisis communication mediums (e.g., issuing a press release or holding a call to investors) is negligible compared to the cost of corrective actions (e.g., replacing a leader, devising or implementing policy changes, or issuing a product recall) (Beneish, Marshall, & Yang, 2017; Colak & Bray, 2016). Even the cost of a comprehensive public relations campaign, which might involve marketing, rebranding, and endorsements, typically does not exceed the cost of corrective actions (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). As a result, leaders of transgressing organizations may prefer to avoid conciliatory rhetorical strategies, which involve substantive corrective action, in favor of defensive rhetorical strategies when possible (Kim, Avery, & Lariscy, 2009). Moreover, pursuing a conciliatory rhetorical strategy either signals or explicitly conveys to stakeholders that the organization did, in fact, engage in illegitimate behavior. Thus, unless stakeholders already firmly believe that the organization's behavior was illegitimate, pursuing a conciliatory strategy may introduce liability for the organization (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990).

Importantly, the rhetorical strategies discussed above are not necessarily related to defending against or accommodating specific stakeholder claims. Prior stakeholder theory-focused research largely considers whether an organization's crisis response strategy accommodates stakeholder claims or defends the organization against stakeholder claims (Bundy, Shropshire, & Buchholtz, 2013; Hersel et al., 2019). The rhetorical strategies considered here, on the other hand, serve to defend the organization and its behavior in the court of public opinion (i.e., defensive rhetoric) or demonstrate that the organization has fixed any underlying problems so

legitimacy should be restored (i.e., conciliatory rhetoric). Whether the rhetorical strategy accommodates or defends against specific stakeholder claims is immaterial under this framework, unless doing so is essential for the organization to gain control over the narrative about the transgression. In fact, by shaping the narrative about the transgression, either of these rhetorical strategies might serve to prevent stakeholders from making claims altogether or direct their claims toward the organization's preferred course of action.
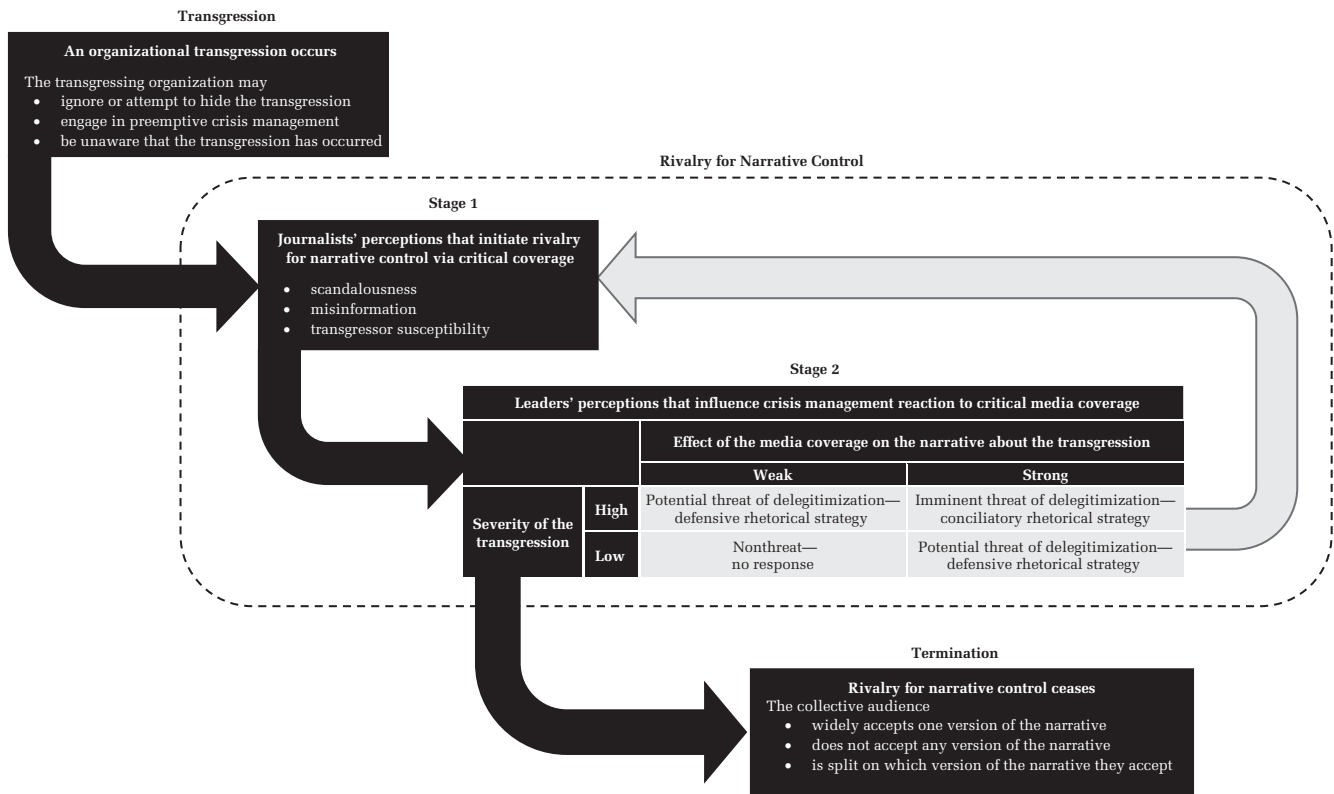
THE INFLUENCE OF JOURNALISTS' AND LEADERS' PERCEPTIONS

The second part of this framework conceptualizes the role of journalists' and leaders' perceptions—their subjective assessments of the rivalry (Chen & Miller, 1994; Chen et al., 2007)—in shaping their actions and reactions. In a multistage conceptual model, I specify perceptual catalysts that convert the latent tensions between organizations and media outlets following a transgression into rivalrous actions and reactions for narrative control. I begin by identifying key perceptions of journalists when they are considering whether to initiate rivalry for narrative control via their initial critical coverage of an organizational transgression. I then consider leaders' perceptions about the transgression and the preceding critical media coverage, which I argue determines whether the organization will respond via crisis management as well as the rhetorical strategy they use in their response. Lastly, I consider the conditions necessary for the rivalry to continue or conclude. I illustrate the stages of rivalry for narrative control in Figure 2. I also provide a selection of longitudinal examples of well-known and recent organization–media rivalries in Table 2, which I use along with the stories from Table 1 to demonstrate how the stages of rivalry for narrative control played out in actual cases.

Stage 1: Journalists' Perceptions That Initiate Rivalry for Narrative Control

Unlike traditional competitive dynamics wherein any competitor can initiate a competitive exchange, a member of the media must initiate a rivalry for narrative control. In cases where they publish a critical story about a previously unknown organizational transgression, it is evident that the journalist has attacked the organization and initiated rivalry for narrative control (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The

FIGURE 2
Multistage Conceptual Model of Organization–Media Rivalry for Narrative Control Following a Transgression

Transgression

An organizational transgression occurs

The transgressing organization may
- ignore or attempt to hide the transgression
- engage in preemptive crisis management
- be unaware that the transgression has occurred

Rivalry for Narrative Control

Stage 1

Journalists' perceptions that initiate rivalry for narrative control via critical coverage
- scandalousness
- misinformation
- transgressor susceptibility

Stage 2

Leaders' perceptions that influence crisis management reaction to critical media coverage			
		Effect of the media coverage on the narrative about the transgression	
		Weak	**Strong**
Severity of the transgression	**High**	Potential threat of delegitimization—defensive rhetorical strategy	Imminent threat of delegitimization—conciliatory rhetorical strategy
	Low	Nonthreat—no response	Potential threat of delegitimization—defensive rhetorical strategy

Termination

Rivalry for narrative control ceases
The collective audience
- widely accepts one version of the narrative
- does not accept any version of the narrative
- is split on which version of the narrative they accept

journalist's breaking news story establishes the preliminary narrative about the transgression and attempts to damage the organization's legitimacy. In other cases, organizations might disclose a transgression, attempt to frame it in a favorable way, or even take corrective actions before journalists have the opportunity to report on the transgression. However, rivalry for narrative control has not materialized in such cases at that point in time. If an organization's version of the narrative about their transgression goes unchallenged by the media, then a rivalrous exchange for narrative control never materializes. While an organization's preemptive crisis management efforts may attempt to shape the narrative about a transgression, crisis management efforts cannot be *rivalrous* until a media outlet engages the organization by attempting to establish an alternative narrative about the transgression. There are three primary motivating journalist perceptions that may catalyze the latent tensions media outlets experience with transgressing organizations into action and rivalry for narrative

control: scandalousness, misinformation, and transgressor susceptibility.

Perception of scandalousness. Journalists' perception of a transgression's scandalousness, or its ability to attract attention from an audience, may stimulate journalists to initiate critical coverage. Various factors associated with the transgression and the organization might influence journalists' perception of scandalousness. In terms of the transgression, media consumers are generally attracted to stories that involve injustice or highlight unsettled, unfolding problems and situations (Roulet, 2019; Trussler & Soroka, 2014; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). In the story about natural gas royalties in Virginia from Table 1, journalists at the *Bristol Herald Courier* became aware that landowners were not receiving royalty payments from natural gas producers (i.e., stakeholder harm) and that a state-overseen escrow account was not making disbursements, though no one knew why (i.e., unresolved uncertainty). An organization's characteristics might also influence journalists' perception of scandalousness.

TABLE 2
A Selection of Exemplary Organization–Media Rivalries for Narrative Control Following a Transgression

Rivalry	Stage 1	Stage 2 (severity of transgression, effect of coverage)	Stage 1 Redux (change in scandalousness, misinformation, susceptibility)	Stage 2 Redux (severity of transgression, effect of coverage)	Termination—narrative accepted by audience
The Seattle Times vs. Washington State Pharmacy and Therapeutics (P&T) Committee (12/11/2012–12/22/2012)	*The Seattle Times* publishes a three-part series on methadone deaths in Washington that attacks the P&T Committee for its policies that push Medicaid patients off of safer drugs and onto methadone	Ten days after the series, the P&T Committee issues an advisory to prescribers about the dangers of methadone and changes its policy that promotes methadone for Medicaid patients *(high, strong)*	*The Seattle Times* publishes a noncritical follow-up article that documents and praises the P&T Committee's decision to change its methadone policy *(diminished)*		Rivalry ceases—the P&T Committee's corrective action fixed the problem
CNN *vs.* SeaWorld (7/19/2013–present)	CNN releases the *Blackfish* documentary that highlights SeaWorld's abuse of captive animal and dangerous conditions for trainers	SeaWorld publicly asserts that the claims in the documentary are misleading but changes policies for treatment and training of captive orcas *(high, strong)*	CNN publishes 41 critical follow-up segments and articles about SeaWorld's continued problems and responses to the documentary *(heightened)*	SeaWorld engages in several public relations campaigns that contest CNN's claims *(high, weak)*	Rivalry continues
The Intercept vs. Facebook and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) (3/26/2018–3/26/2018)	*The Intercept* publishes a critical story about Facebook providing data to ICE for tracking undocumented immigrants that are crossing the U.S. Southern border—the story is quickly debunked, and *The Intercept* issues a correction	Neither Facebook nor ICE responds to the coverage *(low, weak)*	*The Intercept* does not follow-up with additional critical coverage *(diminished)*		Rivalry ceases—neither Facebook nor ICE transgressed
The New York Times vs. FedEx (11/17/2019–11/18/2019)	*The New York Times* publishes an article that is critical of FedEx's lobbying for and using federal corporate tax breaks that allowed FedEx to pay nothing in annual corporate taxes during 2018	FedEx's CEO issues a press release that claims *The New York Times* also paid no corporate taxes in 2017, attacks the paper for its relatively small contribution to U.S. economic development, and challenges its business section editor to a public debate *(low, strong)*	*The New York Times* does not publish any additional critical coverage; however, the paper's spokesperson issues a statement claiming that the FedEx CEO's statement was a stunt to distract from the article's findings *(unchanged)*		Rivalry ceases—audience is split on the propriety of FedEx's political lobbying

For instance, in industries or contexts where behavioral and ethical norms are stringently enforced, journalists may believe that their reporting has the potential to generate attention. Along these lines, in the Washington State Pharmacy and Therapeutics (P&T) Committee story from both Tables 1 and 2, a committee composed primarily of health care professionals was overseeing and implementing policies that reduced the effectiveness of pain management regimens and caused patients to die prematurely. Perhaps not surprisingly, this combination of plot and characters grabbed the attention of *The Seattle Times*'s reporters and, ultimately, their audience.

When journalists perceive that critical coverage can generate audience engagement, it may catalyze the economic-driven tension they experience with transgressing organizations into action. As journalists become increasingly motivated vis-à-vis their perception of scandalousness, they become increasingly likely to initiate rivalry for narrative control and cover the transgression critically.

> *Proposition 1. Journalists' perception of scandalousness positively relates to their engagement in rivalry for narrative control via critical coverage of the transgression.*

Perception of misinformation. Journalists may become motivated to pursue critical coverage when they believe the transgressing organization is misinforming its stakeholders. Given the economic and legitimacy penalties that organizations might incur following a transgression, they may be particularly inclined to misinform their stakeholders (Miller, 2006; Zavyalova et al., 2012). When journalists perceive that an organization is misinforming its stakeholders, they may scrutinize the organization's claims or seek out evidence that contradicts the organization's narrative (Clayman et al., 2007). For instance, when an orca killed its trainer during a show in 2010, SeaWorld publicly claimed that the incident was purely the result of trainer error and was not due to problems with the orca or the park's safety policies. The director of CNN's *Blackfish* documentary publicly asserted that she believed this claim to be conjecture, and that debunking it was a primary motivation for the documentary (Kohn, 2013). In the documentary, she scrutinized SeaWorld's claim by interviewing senior SeaWorld trainers who denied trainer error during the incident, comparing videos of the incident to training sessions, and exposing records that documented a history of aggression in the orca that attacked its trainer.

When journalists perceive that organizations are misinforming stakeholders, it may catalyze the institutional tensions they experience with transgressing organizations, due to their role as watchdogs, into action. As journalists become increasingly motivated by this perception, they become increasingly likely to engage in rivalry for narrative control and cover the transgression critically.

> *Proposition 2. Journalists' perception of misinformation positively relates to their engagement in rivalry for narrative control via critical coverage of the transgression.*

Perception of transgressor susceptibility. Journalists may be stimulated to pursue critical coverage by the possibility of effecting positive change within the transgressing organization. The media's institutional role as a critical change agent (or interventionist) creates a source of tension between journalists and organizations following transgressions (Clayman et al., 2007; Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017, 2018) and motivates journalists to shape narratives about transgressions in ways that prompt re-legitimizing changes in delegitimized organizations (Bednar, 2012; Hanitzsch, 2011; Norris, 2014; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). For example, if journalists can identify a particular person or policy that, if removed or changed, might help to re-legitimize the organization, then they may become increasingly motivated to take action (Gomulya & Boeker, 2014; Zavyalova et al., 2012). Such was the case in the story about Wal-Mart's Latin American operations from Table 1, in which journalists uncovered a widespread bribery scheme to eliminate competition in Mexico. *The New York Times* journalists who published the story likely believed that Wal-Mart would be forced to adjust its policies, practices, and personnel to achieve re-legitimization, for which stakeholders would credit the journalists as change agents. Journalists may also believe that an organization is likely to make re-legitimizing changes in response to critical coverage if stakeholder discontent is high (Bundy et al., 2013; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997) or the organization has a history of responding to pressure from the media (Bednar, Boivie, & Prince, 2013; Durand & Vergne, 2015).

Given the media's institutional role as a critical change agent, if journalists perceive that a transgressing organization is susceptible to critical coverage and is likely to make substantive changes when attacked, then it may catalyze the change promoting

tensions that they experience with organizations into action. As this perception increases journalists' motivation to produce changes in transgressing organizations, they become increasingly likely to initiate rivalry for narrative control and cover the transgression critically.

> *Proposition 3. Journalists' perception of transgressor susceptibility positively relates to their engagement in rivalry for narrative control via critical coverage of the transgression.*

Stage 2: Leaders' Perceptions That Influence a Crisis Management Reaction

Following a media attack, an organization's leaders must consider not only whether they will engage with the outlet in an attempt to control the narrative about the transgression, but also how they will do so. I consider the interaction of two leader perceptions—the severity of the transgression (i.e., perceptual assessment of the transgression) and the effect of coverage on the narrative (i.e., a perceptual assessment of the preceding rivalrous action)—that likely play central roles in determining both the likelihood of an organization reacting to critical media coverage and the rhetorical strategy they pursue. Various other perceptions may influence leaders' sensemaking at this stage; however, for the development of this framework, I focus on these two fundamental explanatory mechanisms for catalyzing the tensions organizations experience with media outlets into action.

In light of critical media coverage about their organization's transgression, leaders must assess the severity of the transgression as they consider whether and how to respond. To assess the severity of the transgression, an organization's leaders must consider characteristics of the transgression to evaluate whether they believe the transgression is sufficiently severe to provoke stakeholders to dissociate from the organization. For example, harm caused to stakeholders or illegal conduct are common transgression-related characteristics that stakeholders are likely to consider highly illegitimate; therefore, these characteristics might heighten leaders' concerns about the severity of the transgression. Regarding *The Seattle Times*'s story about the Washington State P&T Committee methadone policy from Tables 1 and 2, the committee's leaders likely realized the severity of the transgression was high as a result of the media coverage, which depicted their pain management policies as promoting Medicaid

cost savings at the expense of patient safety (i.e., stakeholder harm). Leaders may expect that, if stakeholders revoke legitimacy and withdraw from the organization, it could impede their organization's ability to perform or may represent an existential threat to the organization (Baum, 1999; Hannan & Freeman, 1989). In this case, *The Seattle Times* reported that, following its initial three-part series, state lawmakers began considering whether the legislature should reabsorb the P&T Committee's decision-making authority.

Beyond assessing the severity of the transgression, leaders may also consider the extent to which critical coverage has affected the narrative about their organization's transgression. Leaders perceive a strong effect if they believe that coverage has shifted the narrative in a way that has meaningfully changed their audience's beliefs about what happened, who was involved, and what should be done (Hoefer & Green, 2016). For example, CNN's *Blackfish* documentary sparked widespread public interest in SeaWorld's handling of incidents that endangered orca trainers. Moreover, in interviews presented within the documentary itself, senior orca trainers claimed the documents uncovered by the journalists contradicted SeaWorld's internal communications about the incidents, which changed the trainers' outlook about their employer's culpability for the transgression. Given these stakeholder reactions, it is likely SeaWorld executives perceived the documentary as having a strong effect on the narrative about the organization's transgression.

In other cases, critical media coverage does not heighten organization leaders' concerns. Following *The Intercept*'s 2018 story claiming that Facebook and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency were working together to track undocumented immigrants (see Table 2), the leaders of Facebook and ICE were unlikely to perceive the coverage as having a strong effect. This was due to the correction *The Intercept* issued shortly after the article's publication, citing editorial errors surrounding the article's primary claims. This correction concerning primary claims in the article undoubtedly made stakeholders wary of accepting *The Intercept*'s narrative. While major reporting errors are sure to diminish a story's ability to affect the narrative about a transgression, leaders may perceive coverage as having a weak effect for other reasons as well, such as coverage that presents unconvincing evidence or fails to attract stakeholder attention (Barber & Odean, 2008; Ben-Rephael, Da, & Israelsen, 2017).

Together, leaders' perceptions of the severity of the transgression and the effect of coverage on the narrative allow leaders to consider the overall threat of delegitimization. I classify leaders' perceptions of threat of delegitimization into three categories: imminent threat, potential threat, and nonthreat. Below, I develop propositions about organizations' crisis management responses according to leaders' perceptions of these three types of threats.

Imminent threat of delegitimization. Leaders sense an "imminent threat" of delegitimization when they perceive that the severity of the transgression is high and that critical coverage has had a strong effect on the narrative. In this scenario, all of the conditions are present for leaders to expect impending stakeholder withdrawal: the characteristics of the transgression are sufficiently illicit as to warrant delegitimization, and adversarial media coverage has created a narrative that is convincing stakeholders of such. Thus, leaders are likely to anticipate that stakeholders will revoke legitimacy and withdraw unless the organization can gain control over the narrative and recraft it to be favorable (Miller & Chen, 1994). Furthermore, when leaders sense an imminent threat, they may expect stakeholders to interpret nonresponse as being dismissive about a severe transgression, thereby increasing the likelihood of stakeholder withdrawal. As a result, leaders are compelled to react because they wish to avoid the negative effects of withdrawal, which they believe is impending under the circumstances.

Proposition 4a. Leaders' perception of an imminent threat of delegitimization positively relates to the likelihood of a crisis management reaction to critical media coverage.

When leaders sense an imminent threat of delegitimization, they are more likely to use a conciliatory rhetorical strategy than a defensive rhetorical strategy. To reverse a strong media-driven narrative about a severe transgression using defensive rhetoric, the organization must convince stakeholders that the transgression does not warrant delegitimization. But, under these conditions, the leaders themselves believe that the transgression does warrant delegitimization. Thus, reversing the momentum of a strong, media-driven narrative about a severe transgression may seem futile to leaders (Coombs & Holladay, 2010). Moreover, if they believe stakeholders have already accepted the media's version of the narrative, leaders may anticipate that stakeholders will view a defensive response by the organization as an attempt to minimize a grievous transgression, thereby intensifying the stakeholders' desire to punish the organization (Elsbach, 1994).

If leaders pursue a conciliatory strategy, on the other hand, they embrace the narrative the media has established by acknowledging that the transgression warrants delegitimization. Then, leaders can attempt to steer the narrative in a way that is favorable for the organization by claiming they have eliminated any underlying problems through their use of substantive corrective action and, as such, legitimacy should be restored. As a result, leaders might believe that a conciliatory approach maximizes the likelihood of mitigating an imminent threat of delegitimization.

Proposition 4b. Leaders' perception of an imminent threat of delegitimization positively relates to their preference for a conciliatory rhetorical strategy as the form of crisis management they pursue when reacting to critical media coverage.

Potential threat of delegitimization. Leaders sense a "potential threat" of delegitimization when they perceive that the severity of the transgression and the effect of the coverage on the narrative are either high and weak or low and strong, respectively. Unlike an imminent threat, where stakeholder withdrawal is looming, a potential threat involves the risk of stakeholder withdrawal in the future. A severe transgression combined with a weak effect of coverage on the narrative represents a potential threat because additional coverage may, if left unchecked, sufficiently strengthen the unfavorable narrative to the extent that it ultimately convinces stakeholders to withdraw from the organization. A potential threat also exists in scenarios wherein leaders believe that the transgression was not severe, yet media coverage is having a strong effect on the narrative about the transgression. For example, in *The New York Times* versus FedEx rivalry concerning federal corporate tax breaks (see Table 2), FedEx's leaders perceived the severity of their transgression (i.e., lobbying for and using federal tax breaks—a ubiquitous practice among commercial organizations) as low, which the CEO communicated in his press release following the article's publication (see Figure 1). However, *The New York Times*'s appeal to pathos, which involved depicting FedEx as avoiding federal taxes thanks to the organization's political connections, strongly stimulated the audience's sense of injustice and likely made some stakeholders question whether the practices were acceptable (Tankersley, Eavis, & Casselman, 2019; see public comments). Thus, even though FedEx's leaders perceived the transgression to be trivial, they may have sensed a potential threat of delegitimization in light of the coverage's strong effect on the narrative.

Sensing a potential threat tends to provoke a reaction from leaders. Leaders might expect that stakeholders will eventually revoke legitimacy and withdraw from the organization if an adversarial media outlet is left unchecked and continues to strengthen its version of the narrative about what the leaders perceive to be a severe transgression. Under these conditions, leaders might think it a matter of time before critical media coverage convinces stakeholders of what the leaders themselves already know—the transgression is sufficiently severe to warrant delegitimization. Leaders are also likely to react when they perceive media coverage is having a strong effect about what they believe to be a trivial transgression. This is because a strong media-driven narrative may stir intense emotional reactions from stakeholders when they might otherwise be apathetic (Deephouse, 2000; Zavyalova et al., 2017). As a result, leaders tend to react to critical coverage when it presents a potential threat, rather than ignore it, because they want to eliminate the risk of experiencing delegitimization and stakeholder withdrawal in the future (Miller & Chen, 1994).

Proposition 5a. Leaders' perception of a potential threat of delegitimization positively relates to the likelihood of a crisis management reaction to critical media coverage.

As they consider how to react, leaders may believe that a defensive rhetorical strategy is a preferential option for combatting the media-driven narrative under these circumstances. If leaders perceive the transgression to be severe and the effect of media coverage to be weak, they may believe they can take control of the narrative and reverse it—without incurring the outsized cost of pursuing substantive corrective action (Beneish et al., 2017; Colak & Bray, 2016). Moreover, pursuing a conciliatory rhetorical strategy under these circumstances might signal the severity of the transgression to stakeholders (Gomulya & Boeker, 2014), thereby corroborating the media outlet's narrative that had thus far been unconvincing. If leaders perceive the severity of the transgression to be low but the effect of media coverage on the narrative to be strong, they will likely endeavor to combat the narrative by convincing stakeholders that the transgression is not grievous. Such was the case when FedEx's leaders attempted to convey the acceptability of their behavior and combat *The New York Times*'s narrative. FedEx took a defensive approach by attacking *The New York Times* for using tax breaks in a similar way and by highlighting the positive economic impact of FedEx's capital investments—made possible by the federal tax breaks.

Under these circumstances, leaders are likely to prefer a defensive strategy because conciliation would involve admitting that the organization's behavior was improper even though the leaders do not believe it to be so.

Proposition 5b. Leaders' perception of a potential threat of delegitimization positively relates to their preference for defensive rhetorical strategies as the form of crisis management they pursue when reacting to critical media coverage.

Nonthreat. When leaders perceive that the severity of the transgression is low and media coverage has had a weak effect on the narrative about the transgression, they are likely to believe the coverage is a "nonthreat" and not respond (Andrevski & Miller, 2022; Chen & MacMillan, 1992; Miller & Chen, 1994). Leaders might simply be unconcerned with a nonthreat because it is unlikely to produce delegitimization and stakeholder withdrawal. Furthermore, they may not want to draw unnecessary attention to a nonthreatening piece of critical coverage or to give the impression that the claim is legitimate by responding. When *The Intercept* published and then quickly corrected its factually distorted story about Facebook and ICE working together to track and detain undocumented workers, leaders at the two organizations likely perceived the coverage as a nonthreat—partly because the story lost its ability to influence the narrative when the outlet issued the correction (Barkin & Levy, 1983; Karlsson, Clerwall, & Nord, 2017). In addition, the author of the story later confirmed that the organizations were actually working together to fulfill a court-issued subpoena to track an active child predator, which leaders at the two organizations were unlikely to view as a transgression at all, much less a severe one. Under these conditions, leaders are likely to believe that engaging in crisis management to control the narrative is unnecessary or that it might constitute a strategic misstep (Andrevski & Miller, 2022; Miller & Chen, 1994).

Proposition 6. Leaders' perception of a nonthreat negatively relates to the likelihood of a crisis management reaction to critical media coverage.

Redux: Continuation of Rivalry for Narrative Control

After the organization has reacted or not reacted to media coverage, journalists must decide if they will reengage with the organization by pursuing additional critical coverage or allow the rivalry to

terminate. At this stage, journalists' perceptions of scandalousness, misinformation, and transgressor susceptibility remain the primary motivating factors, which may again catalyze the tensions into reaction. However, these perceptions can change following an organization's reaction or lack thereof. Thus, journalists must reevaluate and consider whether scandal, misinformation, and transgressor susceptibility have decreased, increased, or remain the same as when they initiated critical coverage. For instance, after the Washington State P&T Committee issued an advisory to physicians and announced changes to its methadone policy, *The Seattle Times* published a follow-up piece praising the committee's decision. Presumably, the journalists' perceptions about scandal, misinformation, or transgressor susceptibility changed as a result of the committee's corrective action.

Rivalry for narrative control can continue for as long as journalists and leaders are sufficiently motivated by the perceptions discussed above to catalyze their mutual tensions into reactions. If either party continues to reengage the other in an attempt to control the narrative about the transgression, it initiates repetition of Stages 1 and 2 discussed above. When journalists perceive that high levels of scandalousness, misinformation, or transgressor susceptibility persist, they are prone to reengage the organization via additional critical coverage. Under these circumstances, journalists likely believe that they can generate additional audience engagement and fulfill their journalistic role identities as watchdogs and critical change agents. An organization's leaders, similarly, are likely to continue reengaging the media outlet with additional crisis management for as long as they perceive a threat of delegitimization.

When either party remains motivated to control the narrative, rivalries can persist and evolve over many years. For example, the rivalry between CNN and SeaWorld continues after seven years of back and forth, with CNN publishing over 40 articles and segments criticizing SeaWorld's practices. However, journalists and leaders' perceptions are dynamic—their perceptions may change as they consider each subsequent reaction in the exchange. For instance, although SeaWorld executives likely sensed an *imminent threat* of delegitimization following CNN's initial attack, they may have considered the follow-up coverage to only be a *potential threat* of further delegitimization because it did not "move the needle" the same way the *Blackfish* documentary did (Shaffer, 2019: 1). As a result, SeaWorld executives shifted their rhetorical strategy from a conciliatory strategy to a defensive strategy when responding to CNN's follow-up coverage, engaging in several public relations campaigns to combat CNN's attacks.

Termination: Rivalry for Narrative Control Concludes

When journalists and leaders lack motivation to continue reengaging one another, rivalry for narrative control terminates. At this stage, both parties' perceptions leave them either content with the current prevailing narrative or unwilling to continue reengaging the other party. Depending on how well established either party's version of the narrative was prior to rivalry termination, the audience may widely accept a version of the narrative, not accept either version of the narrative, or be split on which version of the narrative to accept.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to conceptualize rivalry for narrative control between members of the media and organizations following a transgression. It integrated and extended competitive dynamics and crisis management research to construct a two-part theoretical framework of rivalry for narrative control. In reconceptualizing organizations and the media as potential rivals following a transgression, this framework makes two primary contributions to competitive dynamics research, as well as a notable contribution to crisis management research. I discuss these contributions below and provide recommendations for future research.

Conceptualizing Rivalrous Exchanges Between Dissimilar Rivals

In conceptualizing rivalry for narrative control, this framework designates transgressing organizations and media outlets as potential rivals, broadening the concept of "rivals" from competitive dynamics research. In doing so, it adds to theory on competitive dynamics by suggesting that media outlets and organizations compete over a unique sociocognitive resource—control of the narrative about a transgression. Not only does this expand the concept of "rivalry" from extant competitive dynamics research, but it also reemphasizes the idea put forth by Waldron and colleagues (2019) that rivalry can take social in addition to commercial forms.

In its conceptualization of organization–media relations, this framework also recognizes that latent

rivalries may materialize between dissimilar actors when situation-specific conditions create tensions between the two parties. In this framework, I posit that an event (i.e., an organizational transgression) may create tensions between dissimilar actors that lead them to compete with one another over a resource that only manifests as the result of the event (i.e., control over the narrative about the transgression). This is an important change from traditional ways of thinking about how rivalries emerge and opens the study of competitive dynamics to other latent rivalries between dissimilar actors. Furthermore, this conceptual development might also apply to events that cause competitive landscape shifts (Withers et al., 2018), which create rivalries between commercial organizations that do not otherwise compete with one another.

This framework suggests that a member of the media must initiate rivalry for narrative control, which represents a deviation from existing competitive dynamics theory about how rivalrous exchanges commence. In traditional competitive dynamics, researchers assume the existence of a rivalry between two firms that target the same market, and, as such, either firm has the ability to initiate a rivalrous exchange by taking an action that affects the other (Chen & Miller, 2012; Rindova et al., 2004). However, media outlets and organizations do not inherently compete over the same market, nor do they tend to have longstanding rivalrous relationships predating an exchange about a transgression. As a result, when organizations engage in crisis management prior to a media outlet covering the transgression, rivalry for narrative control has not yet commenced. In fact, if journalists are not motivated by their perceptions of scandalousness, misinformation, and transgressor susceptibility, then the organization's version of the narrative about the transgression may go unchallenged by the media. In such a case, rivalry for narrative control never materializes. Thus, in this form of rivalry, the onus of initiating a rivalrous exchange rests with one party—the media.

Considering when rivalry for narrative control might continue or terminate also adds to theory about the conclusion of situational rivalries between dissimilar actors. While commercial rivalries do not conclude per se (Chen & MacMillan, 1992; Rindova et al., 2004), prior work on rivalries between dissimilar actors suggests that such rivalries tend to terminate (Markman et al., 2016). Specifically, these studies indicate that rivalries between dissimilar actors conclude when one actor achieves supremacy over the other within their competitive domain

(Waldron et al., 2019). I posit that the conclusion of a rivalry between dissimilar actors is not necessarily contingent upon one side achieving supremacy over the other. Instead, this framework claims that rivalry for narrative control ceases when both parties' perceptions fail to convert their underlying tensions into additional reactions, regardless of whether a party has won control over the narrative. Going further, this framework uncovers a domain in which achieving supremacy does not necessarily lead to a conclusion of the rivalry. Media outlets are particularly likely to continue covering a transgression after they have gained control of the narrative when they perceive that scandalousness, misinformation, or transgressor susceptibility persist.

Considering Alternative Competitive Actions That Influence Stakeholder Perceptions

This framework enriches competitive dynamics research by establishing that organizations engage in rhetorical battles to influence stakeholder perceptions. Specifically, this framework incorporates critical media coverage and organizations' use of rhetorical strategies into the portfolio of potentially rivalrous actions, thereby adding to recent research on alternative competitive actions in competitive dynamics. Scholars have previously considered word responses and language games as alternative competitive actions within traditional competitive exchanges (Gao et al., 2017; Rindova et al., 2004). Similarly, I posit that organizations may engage with entities that threaten their legitimacy using rhetorical strategies to influence stakeholder perceptions via control over narratives. Moreover, media coverage is exclusively communicative and aims to shape the perceptions of an organization's stakeholders. Thus, incorporation of media coverage and rhetorical strategies as potential competitive actions not only reinforces the notion that persuasive communication can constitute a rivalrous action, but also establishes that organizations may engage in rhetorical battles to influence stakeholder perceptions about their legitimacy.

By bringing rhetorical battles into the realm of competitive dynamics, this framework also provides a new lens through which researchers might study the role of rhetoric in other arenas. For example, scholars consider rhetoric and important instrument for generating institutional change (Green, 2004; Harmon, Green, & Goodnight, 2015; Hoefer & Green, 2016; Waldron, Fisher, & Pfarrer, 2016). Ocasio, Loewenstein, and Nigam (2015) argued that communicative events

and institutional narratives play an important role in the development of new institutional logics within a field. Moreover, they recognized that multiple competing institutional narratives may exist throughout this process. The conceptual development in the present framework suggests that organizations within a field might utilize persuasive communication to compete with each other for control over institutional narratives. By gaining control over institutional narratives, an organization may be able to promote the adoption or maintenance of their preferred logics.

Expanding Crisis Management Research to Include Organization–Media Rivalry

This framework extends crisis management research by considering a novel mechanism that may influence an organization's crisis response strategy. Much of the prior research on crisis response strategies draws on stakeholder theory to predict and prescribe how organizations might handle stakeholder claims (Bundy et al., 2017). I posit that an organization's leaders might instead focus their crisis management efforts on competing for and establishing a narrative that alters or minimizes stakeholders' claims by changing their perceptions about the organization or the transgression. Leaders might pursue different crisis response strategies when competing with a media outlet for control of the narrative than they would if they focused on addressing stakeholder claims. As a result, this framework may account for additional variance in crisis response strategies beyond that of existing crisis management frameworks.

Viewing members of the media as potential rivals to transgressing organizations also advances conceptualizations of the media in crisis management research. Prior crisis management research widely considers the media's role in post-transgression contexts as that of an institutional "infomediary" (Deephouse & Heugens, 2009; Zavyalova et al., 2012). Such work has presented members of the media as disseminators of unbiased information, thereby depicting media outlets as institutions that serve to keep stakeholders informed. This portrayal of the media holds merit, which is why I incorporated it into this framework by considering the tensions that arise from journalists' institutional role identities. Yet, this framework also recognizes that members of the media may act out of self-interest, as reflected in the economic tensions that arise from their desire to boost audience engagement and their outlet's financial performance. This conceptualization not only

serves to enhance our understanding of why media outlets cover transgressions, but it may also better represent how leaders of transgressing organizations view adversarial members of the media. And, viewing members of the media as self-serving actors might influence how organizations interact with the media outlets that attempt to influence narratives about them.

This framework also establishes narratives and narrative control as influential factors for organizations' reintegration efforts following a transgression. Prior research has considered narrative-shaping aspects of organizations' crisis management efforts and media coverage (Elsbach, 1994; Pfarrer et al., 2008; Zavyalova et al., 2012), but has not yet explicitly conceptualized how narratives fit into crisis management and organization–media interplay (Graf-Vlachy et al., 2020). Within the current framework, I propose that narratives play a central role in shaping stakeholders' perceptions about a transgression, thereby influencing the organization's reintegration efforts. Moreover, I posit that transgressing organizations and media outlets can shape narratives about transgressions by incorporating information about what happened, who was involved, and what should be done into their crisis management efforts and coverage. By examining the central role narratives play in organizations' attempts to reintegrate with stakeholders and introducing rivalry for narrative control as a mechanism for influencing narratives, this framework opens numerous opportunities for future research within the crisis management domain.

Future Research Directions

This theoretical framework opens opportunities for further inquiry in both competitive dynamics and crisis management research. Recognizing organizations and the media as rivals provides additional momentum to the dissimilar rival movement that is developing within the competitive dynamics literature (Waldron et al., 2019). This framework introduces two novel nonmarket players to this movement: media outlets and noncommercial organizations. Future research might also consider other underexplored forms of rivalry, such as firms versus governments, governments versus activists, or between competing media outlets.

Regarding future research on rivalry for narrative control, one direction that researchers might explore further is related to the nature of organization–media rivalrous relationships. One key aspect of this

type of relationship that is unaddressed in the present framework is that of power imbalances in the narrative control arena (DeSarbo, Grewal, & Wind, 2006). An outlet or organization's status, size, and reputation might allow them to gain some asymmetric suasory advantage over their rival (Barnett, 1997; Barnett & Amburgey, 1990; Ferrier, Smith, & Grimm, 1999). Moreover, media outlets tend to enjoy a stable audience that often seeks to be influenced by the outlet's coverage and perspective (Martin & Yurukoglu, 2017). Organizations, on the other hand, typically do not have this type of audience. An organization's stakeholders, while often attentive, may not be as susceptible to the organization's influence when compared to that of a preferred media outlet. As such, media outlets may have an inherent suasory advantage in controlling a narrative. Additionally, future research might consider potential alternative outcomes of winning or losing a rivalry for narrative control. For instance, researchers might examine outcomes related to the transgressing organization's subsequent rivalry with traditional rivals or changes to norms within the transgressing organization's industry or sector related to wins or losses in the narrative control domain.

Future research might explore the specific factors that influence journalists and leaders' perceptions identified in the framework. For example, in Stage 1 of the model, journalists who have experience covering the transgressing organization's beat may be better able to recognize scandalousness, misinformation, and transgressor susceptibility; thus, they may be more likely to cover the transgression than other journalists (Mellado & Van Dalen, 2014). In Stage 2 of the model, a range of personality traits (e.g., overconfidence, narcissism, and aggression) or experiences (e.g., prior crisis management or past media rivalries) may influence leaders' perceptions about the transgression itself as well as the critical coverage (Gamache & McNamara, 2019; König, Graf-Vlachy, Bundy, & Short, 2020).

Lastly, while this framework is descriptive in nature, future research might explore normative implications for transgressing organizational leaders and the journalists covering them by studying specific effects of either party's actions on their counterpart's perceptions. For instance, future crisis management research might consider the effects of specific narrative-constructing components or rhetorical devices used to influence narratives and subsequent stakeholder perceptions. Doing so could provide suggestions to journalists or leaders about how to most effectively develop

and shape narratives about transgressions for their own specific purposes. Can journalists build intrigue and capture additional stakeholder attention by highlighting uncertainty and unexplained behaviors related to a transgression, before exposing scandalous deeds (Le Masurier, 2015)? Can organizations combat media outlets' narrative-building efforts by preemptively providing a clear and rational account of the transgression (Arpan & Pompper, 2003)? What specific rhetorical devices or tactics should either party use for overcoming a media- or organization-driven narrative (Waldron et al., 2015)? Should organizations attack the credibility of the journalists or media outlets who cover them to minimize the likelihood of a response (Koch, Denner, Viererbl, & Himmelreich, 2019)? Research questions related to prescribing narrative-controlling tactics such as these may represent lines of future inquiry.

CONCLUSION

Organizations and media outlets regularly battle to influence stakeholders' perceptions about the many organizational transgressions littering the popular press. The framework developed here conceptualizes the unique tensions, actions, and perceptions at play during rivalry for narrative control following transgressions by organizations. It explores journalists and leaders' sensemaking efforts as they consider whether and how they might attempt to shape the narrative about a transgression. This framework also expands theory about rivalry between dissimilar actors within the competitive dynamics domain. Moreover, it represents an important advance in the conceptualization of organization–media interplay following transgressions. My hope is that this framework will promote further examination of this form of rivalry and encourage competitive dynamics researchers to consider other underexplored forms of rivalry.

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