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A Million Little Crises: A Case Study of the Communication Surrounding “A Million Little Pieces”

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Background and Introduction

On January 8, 2006, an article on the investigative Web site *The Smoking Gun* revealed that James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, which had sold more than 3.5 million copies, contained multiple fictional elements and sensationalized scenarios. This was problematic for the book's publisher, Random House, since the book was marketed as a non-fiction memoir.

Additionally, while the book was originally released in 2003, it had only recently climbed to the top of The New York Times nonfiction paperback best-seller list, maintaining the position for 15 weeks, after being selected as Oprah's Book Club selection in September 2005. On January, 26, Oprah Winfrey interviewed Frey on her daytime talk show. Her introduction of Frey included "I feel really duped," ("James Frey," 2006) which only served to fuel media coverage of the book's inaccuracies and deemed Frey the "man who fooled Oprah."

This case study will provide an overview of media coverage that surrounded crisis, beginning with Frey's attempts to discredit those who questioned the validity of his memoir and ending with his full apology. Crisis strategies selected by both Frey and Random House will be discussed, while suggestions for alternate or improved response strategies are addressed.

A Million Little Responses

In an attempt to diffuse *The Smoking Gun* article, Frey posted the following statement on his personal Web site shortly before the investigative feature was made public

This is the latest investigation into my past, and the latest attempt to discredit me. In an effort to be consistent with my policy of openness and transparency, I thought I should share it with the people who come to this website and support me and my work. So let the haters hate, let the doubters doubt, I stand by my book, and my life, and I won't dignify this with any sort of further response" (Martelle & Collins, 2006).

This was inconsistent with a statement he made while being interviewed by *The Smoking Gun*. Frey was quoted as saying events in the "nonfiction" work were embellished for "obvious dramatic reasons" ("The man," 2006).

On January 9, the book's hardcover publisher, Double Day, and paperback publisher, Anchor Books, both owned by Random House Publishing, released a joint statement primarily asserting that the authenticity of the memoir was not of primary concern. The publishers stated that "We stand in support of our author, James Frey, and his book, which has touched the lives of millions of readers" (Strauss & Memmott, 2006).

The story topped international entertainment news as journalists penned catchy headlines playing on the book's title such as "Is Minnesota memoir a million fabrications?" in the *Star Tribune* (Rybak, 2006), "Authors' front falling to pieces" in *The Australian* (Walden, 2006), and "Bending the truth a million little ways" in *The New York Times* (Kakutani, 2006).

A majority of the coverage revolved around the police reports and other public records that discredited many of the claims and narrative elements presented in Frey's memoir—many of which were addressed in *The Smoking Gun* investigative article. According to an article published in *The New York Times* on January 10, one month before *The Smoking Gun* article was released, Frey told *The Times* he had provided in-depth documentation of his account of events in *A Million Little Pieces* to lawyers at both Random House and Harpo, the production company owned by Winfrey. However, during the interview he did not allow the reporter to view those materials (Wyatt, 2006).

Originally classified by Random House as a non-fiction memoir, *A Million Little Pieces* tells Frey's story of how he coped with being an alcoholic drug abuser and the resulting time he spent in a rehabilitation and a twelve-step treatment center. The book addresses Frey's experiences prior to rehab as well as his battle with addictions.

Other stories, shattered to pieces

Frey is not alone, as other writers have been questioned about the authenticity of their work. In 1983, Rigoberta Menchu, a Guatemalan peace activist, wrote an autobiography that won her a Nobel Peace Prize. In 1998, the book was found to be a fabrication (Colford & Wisloski, 2006). Laura Albert is currently suspected of authoring three novels under the name JT LeRoy while having a friend portray LeRoy at public events (Colford & Wisloski, 2006). *New York Times* reporter, Jayson Blair, resigned from the paper in 2003 after he admitted to lying about covering stories which resulted in plagiarism and fabricated quotes (Uebelherr, 2006), just to name a few.

So, why was *A Million Little Pieces* such a high-profile case? Where did Random House fail to conduct adequate crisis management and crisis communication that could have more successfully managed this situation?

What makes this case important—Truth in publishing, a million little facts

The crisis surrounding the lies in Frey's memoir is interesting because it appears to have been within the control of the publishing company. According to *The Smoking Gun* article, the events in the book were disproved with records that are available to the public. Additionally, in an interview with *The New York Times* one month before *The Smoking Gun* article was release, Frey said he had originally envisioned *A Million Little Pieces* as a novel—not a memoir. “We were in discussions after we sold it as to whether to publish it as fiction or as nonfiction” (Wyatt, 2006). According to *The Times* article, when Doubleday decided to publish the book as a non-fiction memoir, Frey said he did not have to change anything and “it was written exactly as it was published” (Wyatt, 2006). It seems that simple fact-checking could have helped avoid much of the crisis.

After the mistruths were uncovered, what should the book's publishers have done to assure their publics that appropriate actions were being taken to resolve the conflict, and to make sure that the conflict did not happen again? These decisions and actions take into consideration classic public relations principles and as a result crisis, brand, and reputation management—all of which involve truthful, timely, two-way communication with key stakeholders.

A piece about the company

Random House, Inc. operates companies around the world in 19 countries. According to Random House's Web site, the company is committed to publishing the best literature by writers both in the United States and abroad and enjoys not only commercial success, but its books have also won more major awards than those published by any other company—including the Nobel Prize, the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award (Random House History, n.d.).

A million little publics sound off

After *The Smoking Gun* article was released, rumors circulated, and were picked up by the media, that Random House would offer full refunds to those who had purchased *A Million Little Pieces* ("World News," 2006). On January 11, Random House reacted by issuing its first statement pertaining to the Frey case on the company Web site since *The Smoking Gun* article was posted. The statement was titled "Contrary to erroneous published reports, Random House, Inc. is not offering a special refund on *A Million Little Pieces*" and supported this position with its company policy (Random House Inc., 2006a).

On January 26, Frey appeared on The Oprah Winfrey Show and admitted to fabricating crucial portions of *A Million Little Pieces*. Winfrey asked Frey "Why did you lie? Why did you have to lie about the time you spent in jail? Why did you do that?" ("James Frey," 2006).

Frey replied

I think one of the coping mechanisms I developed was sort of this image of myself that was greater, probably, than—not probably—that was greater than what I actually was. In order to get through the experience of the addiction, I thought of myself as being tougher than I was and badder than I was—and it helped me cope. When I was writing the book ... instead of being as introspective as I should have been, I clung to that image ("James Frey," 2006).

On that same show, Random House took a beating as journalists sounded off and voiced their opinions about the mistruths included in the "memoir." Richard Cohen, a Washington Post columnist said

I would say to the publishing industry, you guys have got to cut this out. You're not little shops anymore with two or three people working with quills. You're part of large corporations. Hire somebody for \$25,000, \$30,000 a year as a fact checker. A fact checker would have found out in a half an hour that some of this book didn't work because the book doesn't pass the smell test... There is a difference between truth and fiction. We find this out all the time. Now we're finding it out again. This was a betrayal of his readers. It was a betrayal of you ("James Frey," 2006).

Others felt that this brought to light a larger issue of truth in the media. Maureen Dowd, a New York Times columnist said

It's just very disappointing that the publishing house doesn't care. They're just counting their money. And readers don't care. It's gone to the top of the bestseller list. But somebody has to stand up for truth. This is not a close call ("James Frey," 2006).

Winfrey herself mirrored this opinion when she said

I read this quote in *The New York Times* from Michiko Kakutani, who said it best, I think," says Oprah. "She says, 'This is not about truth in labeling or the misrepresentation of one author. ... It is a case about how much value contemporary culture places on the very idea of truth.' And I believe that the truth matters ("James Frey," 2006).

Winfrey also interviewed Nan Talese, senior vice president of Doubleday and the publisher and editor-in-chief of *A Million Little Pieces*. Winfrey asked Talese when she learned that Frey had not told the truth in the book. Talese said

I learned about the jail, the two things that were on *The Smoking Gun*, at the same time you did. And I was dismayed to know that, but I had not—I mean, as an editor, do you ask someone, "Are you really as bad as you are" ("James Frey," 2006)?

Winfrey simply responded, "Yes" ("James Frey," 2006).

The same day that Oprah interviewed Frey and Talese, Random House posted a press release on its Web site stating that "recent interpretations of our previous statement notwithstanding, it is not the policy or stance of this company that it doesn't matter whether a book sold as nonfiction is true. A nonfiction book should adhere to the facts as the author knows them" (Random House Inc., 2006b).

The release also included that while Random House had originally believed the information to be true, after *The Smoking Gun* article was released they met with Frey and found that there were multiple inaccuracies in the book. As a result they stated, "We bear a responsibility for what we publish, and apologize to the reading public for any unintentional confusion surrounding the publication of *A Million Little Pieces*." Random House also noted that they were currently taking several actions including issuing a publisher's and author's note in future printings of the book (Random House Inc., 2006b).

On February 1, Frey published a statement in which he said

As has been accurately revealed by two journalists at an Internet Web site, and subsequently acknowledged by me, during the process of writing the book, I embellished many details about my past experiences, and altered others in order to serve what I felt was the greater purpose of the book. I sincerely apologize to those readers who have been disappointed by my actions (Random House Inc., 2006c).

While sales from the book did not decrease as a result of Frey acknowledging that key elements were in fact fabricated, Random House did have several class-action suits filed against it. In New York, complaints were filed by readers who wanted to be reimbursed for the cost of the time and the hours they spent reading the book. Another New York reader, who works as a social worker and recommended the book to people with substance abuse and legal problems, is suing for \$10 million on behalf of consumers she claims were injured by Frey's fabrications. Readers have also filed lawsuits in Chicago, Seattle, and Los Angeles (Peterson & Zambito, 2006).

Assessment

Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt's (1996) integrated four-step symmetrical model, crisis-management draws comparisons between crisis and a lifecycle. Simply stated, the researchers propose a crisis changes over time as it follows a sequential path through four phases: birth, growth, maturity and decline. As a result, their proposed model of crisis-management involves four main steps: issues management (birth), planning prevention (growth), crisis (maturity), and postcrisis (decline).

This basic model presents a simplistic, yet effective illustration of the crisis lifecycle. For example, practicing issues management before a crisis (birth) may award organizations the ability to influence the crisis outcome during later stages. As the most proactive step, issues management involves an organization scanning its environment for issues that may threaten its well-being. It appears that Random House failed to conduct successful issues management in the case of *A Million Little Pieces* when it did not fact-check the book. This is important because, as was noted earlier, several other non-fiction books with fabrications have drawn negative attention.

Crisis managers should be aware of the trends that surround their organization and how their key publics are affected by and, as a result, interpret issues (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). Random House knew that Frey was a recovering drug addict, they admitted that his memoir had a sensational feel, they were aware of negative coverage that other publishers had received for misrepresenting non-fiction works—and still did not conduct fact-checks on the book.

Issues management should involve using the company's resources to identify threatening issues and then working to influence their course. Random House did not do this. It is also interesting to note that during a crisis, one should to strive for consistency in responses (Coombs, 1999, as cited in Ihlen, 2002). Frey sent mixed messages by first denying that the book contained inaccuracies and then, later, admitting there were fictional elements.

Planning and prevention, the next step in crisis management, seems to be all but overlooked as well, as evidenced by Talese's saying she learned about the mistruths in the memoir from *The Smoking Gun* article ("James Frey," 2006). Since, according to Talese, the issue was not detected, a contingency plan was not developed. This is was a missed opportunity for crisis communicators as planning is the foundation of a crisis management plan (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996).

The fact that Talese knew nothing of *The Smoking Gun* article's revelations is a bit suspicious since the investigative piece revealed they had been working on the story with Frey for six weeks

(“A million,” 2006). While one would think that an organization as large as Random House would have general crisis communication plans in place, an additional six weeks would have allowed for the formation of a specific crisis communication plan. Random House might have chosen to confront the issue publicly and re-classify the memoir into the fiction category prior to *The Smoking Gun* article’s release—removing the “sting” from the investigative report.

When *The Smoking Gun* article was published on January 8, Random House lost its opportunity to act proactively. At this point “...the organizations’ response will have to be limited to reacting to the events and using contingency measures that may reduce any damage caused by its now active publics” (Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996, p. 97).

It also appears that Random House did not apply a timely management intervention. Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt (1996) stated that timely efforts can often help keep a crisis in its birth phase and help avoid the growth and maturity phases when the crisis escalates. They argued that through crisis control organizations can limit the extent and severity of the latter phases, helping an organization more quickly move into the preferred decline of the issue. When the crisis emerged, it appears Random House failed to respond with prompt updates. In fact, the organization released a formal statement to the public only after they were seriously threatened—by a national television audience and the Oprah show—nearly 18 days after the investigative article reported on the mistruths in the memoir and public opinion had already begun to form.

However, appearing on Winfrey’s show does seem to be a strategic move to reach a key public, Oprah’s book club members. Additionally, the move forced Random House to designate a spokesperson, Talese. During the interview, Talese never issued an apology to the readers or Winfrey. She did state that “this whole experience is very sad” (“James Frey,” 2006). Additionally, Talese failed to address steps that were being taken by Random House to avoid similar situations in the future. According to Gonzalez-Herrero and Pratt’s (1996) four-step process model an effective crisis management strategy would include explaining the steps Random House was taking to prevent a repeat of this kind of incident.

The release that the company posted on its Web site the same day as the interview on Winfrey’s show, however, did include an organizational apology that was in-line with Coombs and Schmidt’s (2000) image restoration theory as it utilized the shifting blame strategy. The release identified Frey as the creator of the fabrications and noted that while Random House was sorry for the situation they were previously unaware of the mistruths. The release also nicely outlined future steps that would be taken with the *A Million Little Pieces* book, or actions that were being taken to assure that the book was no longer being represented as a non-fiction work. However, the company did not address steps they are taking to insure that this situation does not arise again with other non-fiction works that are published by the company.

Obviously, as time passed the immediacy of the crisis and coverage of the crisis dwindled as the situation moved to the fourth phase—postcrisis (Gonzales-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). As was mentioned above, Random House did not publicly release plans to prevent future related crises. The author of this paper did not obtain access to internal Random House documents, as a result, other assessments will not be made about the postcrisis phase.

Overall, the communication responses from Random House appear to have been delayed, minimal, and a bit vague. Given the amount of national attention this case received, the organization could have taken the opportunity to help re-define and improve current publishing industry standards related to the way that fiction and non-fiction works are defined and marketed. This was a missed opportunity for Random House to build valuable relationships with key publics—establishing itself as a leader in publishing quality and truth.

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