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# Analysis of the 2002 D.C. Sniper Case: Toward a Response Typology for Threats to Public Safety

## ABSTRACT

We examined the D.C. Sniper case of 2002 to explore crisis communication responses by law enforcement and government sources during the three-week shooting spree. We generated a list of 31 possible crisis communication responses from **image repair theory**, **situational crisis communication theory**, best practices in **crisis communication**, and best practices in **emergency management communication**. The results showed image repair theory and SCCT did not provide an adequate explanation of the communication choices made during this public safety crisis. We therefore propose a **public safety crisis communication typology** that fills a gap in existing crisis communication literature by taking into account organization type and goals.

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## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

- The **differing goals** of communication strategies (reputational, organizational, public safety) create an opportunity to extend existing crisis communication theory.
- This paper explores the crisis communication responses that were employed in official statements during the D.C. sniper investigation and offers a **typology for public safety crises**.

## METHOD

- Content Analysis of **78** news segments from CNN's coverage over a three-week period.
- Examined **225** statements from official sources involved in the investigation.
- Coded: **31** possible response strategies, source, setting, jurisdiction, and date.
- Krippendorff's alpha >0.8 for two coders.



## RESULTS

Response Strategy	Law Enforcement Official Responses	Other Official Sources Responses	Total Responses
Attack the Accuser	0	2	2
Differentiation	0	1	1
Scapegoating	0	4	4
Excuse	0	4	4
Ingratiation	2	1	3
Victimage	0	1	1
Max Disclosure, Min Delay	1	0	1
Partner with the Public	13	17	30
Listen to the Public	0	1	1
Collaborate w/ Credible Sources	3	8	11
Compassion, Concern...	5	3	8
Acknowledge Uncertainty	4	8	12
Self-Efficacy Message	3	4	7
Unable to Comm Freely	3	5	8
Focus on the Victims	2	0	2
Explanations	26	59	85
Grieving/Memorializing	1	1	2
Reconstituting Normalcy	4	1	5
Anger at Perpetrators	5	1	6
Empathizing w/ Perps	1	0	1
Communicating w/ Perps	4	6	10
Under Investigation	3	13	16
Defer to Spokesperson	0	1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>225</b>

## CONCLUSION

While SCCT and Image Repair strategies were *not* the primary responses employed by officials, the strategies that emerged generated a unique typology of crisis communication responses that can be tested with additional cases:

- **Public Safety Strategies:** Explanations; acknowledgements of uncertainty; expressions of compassion, empathy, and concern; displays of anger or emotion; messages of self-efficacy; reconstitution of normalcy.
- **Public Involvement Strategies:** Partnerships with stakeholders; collaborations with credible sources.
- **Investigation Strategies:** Inhibited communications; communication with suspects; nondisclosure of sensitive or critical information.