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CHASING THE NARRATIVE: AN ANALYSIS OF PENN STATE'S ACTIONS DURING
THE SANDUSKY SCANDAL

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ABSTRACT

Sports have always been a staple of American culture. At a time when the pace of the news cycle and lifestyles have grown ever faster, sports have become one of the most publicized topics in the country. In this setting, college athletics has been taking over the spotlight for many years. With all eyes on a program, its communication tactics are its most valuable tool, and when something goes wrong, it is inevitable that it goes public. Based on media research, a content analysis of Penn State's communication materials from the time, and the lessons taught by Penn State public relations lecturers, this thesis will analyze the communication methods Penn State utilized the week after the Jerry Sandusky sex abuse scandal broke, and beyond. It questions whether or not the appropriate crisis communications tactics were utilized while also examining if anything could be learned from the university's actions through a case study of another Big Ten scandal. It explores how Penn State administrators had to fight for the narrative of their own story against those who told it in their place.

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Chapter 1

Executive Summary

Saturday, November 5, 2011, is a day that will forever be ingrained in the minds of Penn Staters across the country.

And the day after that, and the day after that and the day after that.

The entire second week of that month was haunted by a series of events that are now referred to as the Sandusky scandal. The name of this former Penn State assistant football coach spilled out of the mouths of millions of people: media members; students; fans; athletes; and, the public as a whole, for weeks on end.

The news that Jerry Sandusky had been charged with 52 counts related to child sex crimes spread across the country in a matter of minutes.

On this same day, former vice president Gary Schultz and former athletic director Tim Curley were charged with perjury and failure to report a crime. Penn State's first and only comment from President Graham Spanier was centered around the university showing continued support for the officials who were involved in the scandal, not the victims.

Due to the university's lack of comment, the media took the narrative into their own hands. After analyzing the timeline of media reports compared to Penn State's statements, it is clear that Penn State lost the ability to control the story the second administrators took too long to share what they knew.

In lecture halls across campus, public relations professors have always preached the only way to be a successful communications professional is to one, tell the truth. Two, tell it first. And three, tell it yourself. Penn State failed on all three counts.

The media's dominance of the narrative is clearly demonstrated through the handling of coach Joe Paterno's firing by the university. A giant in the eyes of the public was torn down in a matter of hours based on a few comments from reporters that Penn State couldn't ignore. Administrators lost the ability to make decisions for themselves and were tied to the stories the media wanted to tell.

Over the next few years, multiple Big Ten schools found themselves in similar situations with their own scandals overwhelming administrative officials. After witnessing the missteps that Penn State made, did these schools learn anything?

While it did take some time, Penn State has been able to make up for its lack of leadership with new programs, initiatives, and structure throughout the university. However, there is still the question of whether or not it will ever be able to live down the day of November 5, 2011. Or the day after that, and the day after that.

Chapter 2

How The Story Got Away

Comparing the media coverage of the Sandusky scandal to Penn State's actions provides a clear timeline of exactly how Penn State lost control of the narrative of this story. When one harsh opinion was published many more followed. Penn State was overrun by an abundance of national stories calling for action and criticizing its efforts, or lack thereof. The way that the university portrayed Joe Paterno's role in this scandal is the key identifier of the power struggle between the media and university officials.

Sunday: The Statements

News of Sandusky's arrest fell on a football bye week. It was a quiet week for the team with no opportunity to speak to the football staff. Consequently, the first form of communication the university had with the media came as a statement released the night Sandusky was arrested by the president of the university at the time, Graham Spanier.

“The allegations about a former coach are troubling, and it is appropriate that they be investigated thoroughly. Protecting children requires the utmost vigilance.

“With regard to the other presentments, I wish to say that Tim Curley and Gary Schultz have my unconditional support. I have known and worked daily with Tim and Gary for more than 16 years. I have complete confidence in how they have handled the allegations about a former University employee.

“ Tim Curley and Gary Schultz operate at the highest levels of honesty, integrity and compassion. I am confident the record will show that these charges are

groundless and that they conducted themselves professionally and appropriately” (“Spanier: Curley, Schultz,” 2011).

Spanier never once mentioned the victims. He noted that it is important to protect children, but then expressed his unconditional support to the men who were just charged with perjury in a child sexual abuse investigation.

This was Penn State’s first mistake that the media immediately latched on to. Trey Miller, a Penn State alum, prior assistant athletic director at Rutgers University and now Penn State lecturer in sports information, speaks in his classroom about how important it is to show the human side of a crisis in your communication. “If you’re invested, it shows,” says Miller. “You have to show concern” (Miller, 2019). With his statement, it seemed to the public that the only thing Spanier was invested in was the reputation of his employees. This was a situation where expressing empathy was vital and Spanier failed to do that.

The Paterno family was silent all of Saturday even though advisors to the family urged them to release a statement as soon as the story broke. According to a biographer who worked with the cooperation of Paterno and his family, by the time Joe spoke out, “it was too late. Sunday was the day that television cameras began to surround the Paterno home on McKee Street” (Posnanski, 2013). On that Sunday, Paterno released his personal statement. One much longer than Spanier’s comment.

“If true, the nature and amount of charges made are very shocking to me and all Penn Staters. While I did what I was supposed to with the one charge brought to my attention like anyone else involved I can’t help but be deeply saddened these matters are alleged to have occurred.

“Sue and I have devoted our lives to helping young people reach their potential. The fact that someone we thought we knew might have harmed young people to this extent is deeply troubling. If this is true we were all fooled, along with scores of professionals trained in such things, and we grieve for the victims and their families. They are in our prayers...

“I understand that people are upset and angry, but let’s be fair and let the legal process unfold. In the meantime, I would ask all Penn Staters to continue to trust in what that name represents, continue to pursue their lives every day with high ideals and not let these events shake their beliefs nor who they are” (Ganim, 2011).

Paterno also mentioned the actions he took when the incident was reported to him and the legal process he had been cooperatively participating in. He expressed empathy for the victims while also shedding light on the fact that he has devoted his life to helping the children of this university. He stood by his actions saying that he did all that was required of him, but that may not have sat well with those who believed he should’ve done more.

While this statement addresses the points that the Paternos needed to address, they weren’t addressed in a timely fashion. Another piece of advice from Miller was, “being proactive gives you the best chance at influencing the story. The quicker you respond, the more credible you seem” (Miller, 2019). By waiting as long as he did, Paterno lost the chance to take over the narrative that was already beginning to form around him. Everyone was already wondering about the role he played in this situation and started to create their own opinions about what happened.

Monday: Police Commissioner Press Conference

The first time the media was face to face with police and prosecutors was on Monday, November 7, the same day the university announced that Schultz and Curley would step down. Pennsylvania's state police commissioner at the time, Frank Noonan, held a press conference Monday afternoon to discuss the legal nightmare that was beginning to unfold.

The press conference began with Attorney General Linda Kelly introducing Noonan and sharing a small statement of her own. She took her time on the podium to share her opinion saying, "we believe that under the statute, [Paterno] had an obligation to report it to the school administrators and he did that" (Associated Press, 2011). Some news outlets ran with this statement to explain to the public that Paterno did exactly what was required of him. The Associated Press, for example, reported that Paterno, "met his legal requirement when he relayed to administrators what happened" (Associated Press, 2011).

The real newsworthy conversation came from a comment made by the police commissioner during his statement. After discussing the legal points he was obliged to mention, Noonan then added, "somebody has to question about what I would consider the moral requirements of a human being that knows of sexual things that are taking place with a child." Referencing Paterno's role in the events he continued, "this is not a case about football, this is not a case about universities. This is a case about children who have had their innocence stolen from them and a culture that did nothing to stop it or prevent it from happening to others" (Associated Press, 2011).

Just these few sentences instantly altered the tone of the media coverage surrounding this case. It was no longer centered around Sandusky and what he did, but what Penn State and Joe Paterno failed to do. The AP story also included that "some were even asking if the 84-year-old

Paterno should step down after his 46 years on the sidelines” (Associated Press, 2011). This was the first public event that sparked the question of what should be done about Paterno, something that university officials may have already discussed.

During the press conference, Kelly had mentioned that Paterno was cooperative with the investigation and was not being seen as a suspect at that time. This cleared the media’s mind of any legal trouble that Paterno could be in, but Noonan’s statement filled their minds with the moral trouble he was in.

ABC News was one outlet that latched onto this storyline reporting, “his actions were legal but many were asking if his actions were moral.” Their commentary included the fact that “many are openly calling for Joe Paterno, a legend, to step down” and said he was “a man possibly to be cast aside by the very institution he transformed...Paterno failed to live up to his own standards” (ABC News, 2011). Dozens of outlets picked up on this narrative and began to spread the same message all across the country. Joe Paterno didn’t do enough.

Tuesday: The Football Presser

Every Tuesday afternoon during football season Joe Paterno held a press conference to discuss the team’s performance in its last game and the competition coming up. Amid all of the outrage and attention targeted at the Penn State football program during this time, the team still had a game against Big Ten opponent Nebraska to play that upcoming Saturday.

This presser was something set in stone that the media was preparing for. News stations around the country made note of the fact that Paterno had yet to speak to the media about the

topic and that Tuesday's conference would finally give him the chance to do so (Associated Press, 2011).

Press started lining up in front of the Beaver Stadium gates before the Tuesday press conference three hours early.

“The reporters who knew Paterno best understood that this press conference was going to be a fiasco of the highest order. With his hearing problems, his age, his crankiness, and his susceptibility to talking around his answers, along with the blood-in-the-water media frenzy that was the building, they knew this press conference would make things much worse for him. ‘It will be a living funeral,’ one reporter predicted, echoing words Paterno had used through the years” (Posnanski, 2013).

An hour before the press conference was scheduled to take place, a representative from Penn State athletics called Guido D’Elia, a former Penn State branding and marketing director who was working closely with the Paterno family during this time. The call informed him that they were canceling the press conference and at that time, D’Elia says that he knew it was over for Paterno (Posnanski, 2013).

Jeff Nelson, the football sports information director, emerged from Beaver Stadium and announced to the mass of reporters that there would be no press conference that day, and that it wouldn't be rescheduled. The university claimed that because of the “on-going legal circumstances centered around the recent allegations and charges, we have determined that today's press conference cannot be held” (McIntyre, 2011).

In this swift decision made by Spanier, the university once again took away an outlet of communication that could have been used in its favor. Penn State senior lecturer and former

public affairs officer for the secretary of defense, Steve Manuel, shared his opinion about this decision at the time saying, “canceling Paterno’s weekly news conference 30 minutes before it was to begin last Tuesday was another misstep. Penn State still obviously didn’t get it. Joe Paterno should have had his moment in time to have his say” (Gardiner, 2011).

The canceling of the press conference only allowed more time for outlets to express their own take on the story. The Harrisburg Patriot-News was the outlet that broke the story in the first place. It had been covering the progression of the investigation for months and the story had finally exploded nationally. On this Tuesday, the Patriot-News’ front cover was plastered with an editorial headline reading “Penn State’s Graham Spanier, Joe Paterno need to leave as a result of Jerry Sandusky’s case. Doing what the law required wasn’t enough” (“Penn State’s Graham Spanier,” 2011).

The New York Times also took this time to report that Penn State trustees were discussing how to manage Paterno’s departure. “Joe Paterno’s tenure as the coach of the Penn State football team will soon be over, perhaps within days or weeks, in the wake of a sexual abuse scandal that has implicated university officials” (Viera & Thamel, 2011). The report detailed that trustees would decide in a board meeting on Friday, just a day before the football team’s senior day game against Nebraska.

With Paterno’s one guaranteed platform of expression taken away, the media longed for answers. “With the press conference canceled, the crowd around the [Paterno] house grew exponentially, and there was a new aggressiveness in the air... It was another turning point. The scene had become unmanageable. The Paternos had always handled things in a small-town way...This wasn’t a small-town issue anymore” (Posnanski, 2013).

Wednesday: The Firing

After the unexpected silencing by the university on behalf of Paterno the day before, it was clear that something bigger was coming. On Wednesday morning Paterno decided he deserved a right to speak and released his own statement to the media. In this statement, Paterno once again expressed the sorrow this tragedy had caused him and admitted that “With the benefit of hindsight, I wish I had done more” (“ Joe Paterno’s retirement,” 2011).

However, the purpose of this statement was to announce his retirement.

“I have come to work every day for the last 61 years with one clear goal in mind: To serve the best interests of this university and the young men who have been entrusted to my care. I have the same goal today.

That’s why I have decided to announce my retirement effective at the end of this season. At this moment the Board of Trustees should not spend a single minute discussing my status. They have far more important matters to address. I want to make this as easy for them as I possibly can” (“ Joe Paterno’s retirement,” 2011).

Paterno cited that the reason he was deciding to announce his own retirement was because he wanted to make things easier on the Board of Trustees who had more important things to focus on. This was his own way of taking control of a situation that he felt was slipping away from him. “The family released the statement in which Paterno attempted to retire at the end of the season, but within an hour the news stories were reporting that the board might not give him the chance” (Posnanski, 2013).

When the New York Times reported Tuesday that Paterno’s time may be limited, the rest of the country quickly picked up on those claims.

Steve Manuel had a different take on the situation saying, “Coach Paterno was dictating the terms (of his departure). He was challenging the Board of Trustees, and I don’t think they had any choice (but to fire him)” (Gardiner, 2011). There was a part of him that knew his time was coming to an end and this was the best way to avoid the inevitable.

Penn State now had three competing narratives: the university’s own narrative claiming administrators did nothing wrong; Paterno’s narrative that he initially did what he should’ve done, but could’ve done more and is now retiring; and the media’s narrative that not enough was done by any party. The media and Paterno were simultaneously trying to strip Penn State of the ability to control the story, and this may have been the breaking point.

Just hours after his announcement, Paterno received a phone call. The man on the other line, CEO of U.S. Steel and vice-chairman of the Penn State Board of Trustees John Surma, told him that he would not coach another football game at the university where he had dedicated the last 61 years of his life. The board had voted unanimously in its meeting on Wednesday to remove Paterno from his position on the coaching staff. During that same meeting, the board also decided to let go of Spanier. The board held a press conference later that evening to share with the public the decisions they made. The New York Times reported that after the spokesman broke the news, an audible gasp erupted throughout the room from the hundreds of reporters, students and camera operators who were present (Viera, 2011).

It was something that everyone assumed was coming but, at the same time, never expected. Penn Live made sense of the decision saying, “over the past 48 hours, the board had tried to take control as the university came under an avalanche of criticism for Paterno and Spanier’s role in the Jerry Sandusky child sexual abuse scandal” (“Joe Paterno fired,” 2011). And take control they did.

Chapter 3

The Aftermath

New Challenges and Progress:

Directly after the news of Joe Paterno's firing broke, the backlash began. Penn State students were one of the most vocal groups expressing their opposition towards the decision made by the Board of Trustees that night. They filled the streets of downtown State College rioting for what they saw as justice for Paterno. The students believed their school's coach of 46 years didn't deserve to get fired over the phone after dedicating the better part of his life to the university. There was a news truck flipped, chants screamed out and thousands of angry students wreaking havoc on the normally quaint town.

This behavior did no favors for the way Penn State was being discussed in the national media or how the school looked in the eyes of the public across the country. News outlets took to these riots almost immediately. The dozens of media members who were camped out in State College to cover the progression of the scandal finally had compelling visuals to pair with their stories. The news stretched from coast to coast, inspiring live coverage and fiery editorials that came the next day.

CNN's headline read "Survivors of sexual abuse appalled by Penn State unrest," quoting one survivor saying "You're not getting it. You just don't get it" (Park, 2011). Even student media outlets were criticizing the behavior of their classmates with headlines like "The Riot That Should Have Never Happened," plastered on the front of Onward State's website (Kristobak, 2011).

Paterno's biographer detailed in his book, "the campus was overrun with emotion. A riot broke out, several students were videotaped overturning a television truck, more than thirty-five people were arrested, and there was at least \$200,000 worth of damage. Penn State students would be mocked for, as one news site put it, 'rioting for a child-molester enabler'" (Posnanski, 2013).

For Penn State administrators, this created yet another enemy in the battle for the narrative. They were now up against the media, the Paternos, and the student body. Being watched by more eyes than ever, each move the university made from now on had to be precisely planned out.

After this outrage was broadcast nationally, there wasn't much else to talk about in the following days. Actions had been taken by the university and no new information was released regarding the scandal. The next big event that occurred in the timeline was the NCAA beginning its investigation into Penn State's conduct.

This was when administrators began to understand the role they had to play. A press release from Penn State was the first publication to announce the investigation. They were transparent and timely in announcing what was going on internally. The university received a letter from NCAA President Mark Emmert and included his words in its statement detailing verbatim that he was writing to "notify [administrators] that the NCAA will examine Penn State's exercise of institutional control over its intercollegiate athletics programs, as well as the actions, and inactions, of relevant responsible personnel" ("NCAA to launch inquiry," 2011).

The university even included that it was expected to provide responses to several questions asked by the NCAA and made the deadline public. By releasing this information, the

school automatically created another level of accountability for itself. The public was now aware of the standards that Penn State was being held to by the NCAA.

After one more week had passed, Penn State was able to get its actions in line and start the reparation process. On November 28, the university announced its first attempt at making up for its unforgivable mistakes. The Sexual Assault and Relationship Violence Hotline was launched at the end of November. The director for women's studies at Penn State, Peggy Lorah, was quoted in the release saying, "provision of this service is an additional part of Penn State's commitment to make sure victims and observers of victimization have access to a full spectrum of campus and community resources" ("University launches victim," 2011).

In the next week, the university announced the coming launch of the Center for the Protection of Children. With all the negative attention around the football program, the university would be using bowl game revenue to fund this new initiative as a form of reparation.

"Penn State's share of football bowl game revenues not only will be used for a newly formed partnership with an advocacy group for victims of sexual violence, but now also will help launch a center for the study, research, prevention and treatment of child abuse," a Penn State press release detailed ("Penn State to create Center," 2011). The release also disclosed other partnerships and potential collaborators Penn State is seeking to work with to help detect and prevent abuse.

Newly appointed University President Rodney Erickson shared his wishes that, "we want to be known as a University that is doing the right thing and we have committed ourselves to being the national leader on the prevention and treatment of child abuse, so that we will have a meaningful role in fighting this horrific crime" ("Penn State to create Center," 2011).

Another example of the university's new attempt at transparency came in a press release

that included copies of the correspondence between the university and the NCAA. Officials admitted to the public that they want to work with the NCAA cooperatively but would like some more time to answer the questions the association was asking, saying “it became evident that the questions asked in [Emmert’s] letter might be answered in the course of the investigations already in progress” (Baldwin, 2011). While this may not have been the best response, it was an improvement from their previous policy of silence.

Over the next few months, the university took more steps in an attempt to repair its image with the media and the public. It launched an openness website in order to hold itself accountable for sharing as much information as possible, especially with so many ongoing investigations. The university also made an effort to elaborate on its reasoning behind all the personnel changes that had occurred over the previous few months. While this may have come a little late, more information is better than no information.

Now in the month of June 2012, Penn State launched a progress website to serve as a platform to keep track of everything it had done. All these actions made it seem as though the university was moving in a positive direction until the FBI report written by Louis Freeh was released the next month.

The Freeh Report:

On July 12, 2012, the Freeh report covering Penn State’s handling of Jerry Sandusky’s abuse was released. The findings of this report were shocking to many, confirming the fears of many Penn State administrators. According to Freeh’s report, “Penn State’s leadership deferred

to a culture of reverence for the football program and repeatedly concealed Sandusky's activities" (Shipley & Johnson, 2012).

After the report was released to the public, Freeh acknowledged that the, "most saddening and sobering finding is the total disregard for the safety and welfare of Sandusky's child victims by the most senior leaders at Penn State" (Shipley & Johnson, 2012). This comment did not help the already tarnished image that Penn State had in the eyes of the public, and neither did the media reports that came after.

The university responded with a prompt statement beginning, "Today's comprehensive report is sad and sobering in that it concludes that at the moment of truth, people in positions of authority and responsibility did not put the welfare of children first" ("Penn State issues statement," 2012). This response hit all the points that Penn State failed to address when the scandal first broke. The statement then went on to say that the Board of Trustees accepted full responsibility for the failures that occurred throughout the years. It addressed the victims and how important their safety is, how strong they were for cooperating in the investigation to ensure that justice was served and apologized for failing to protect them ("Penn State issues statement," 2012).

The university also stated that it will take Freeh's recommendations very seriously and would immediately continue to work on ways to improve university policies and procedures while also contributing to external causes to aid those affected by abuse ("Penn State issues statement," 2012).

This statement was not enough to silence the critics in the wake of the publication of such a significant report by Freeh. While many news reports focused on the factual findings in the report that Penn State had already addressed, many new, harsh opinions were also formed. While

some people expressed that they believed the Freeh report to be flawed, others shared their belief that Penn State football should receive the death penalty from the NCAA as a consequence of these findings.

The week after the report was released, President Erickson wrote an open letter to the Penn State community. “We must not be afraid to examine ourselves, our policies and our actions — with the clear intent of taking corrective measures and righting the wrongs... Although we cannot undo history, we can become agents for change and reaffirm our core values of honesty, integrity and justice” Erickson said (“A message from President,” 2012).

The purpose of the message was to reassure Penn Staters that the university is dedicated to being better even amid all of the uncertainty the report caused. Acknowledging the pressure that had been put on the university by the public, Erickson continued, “the world is watching and they are anxious for expedient responses.” He noted that changes and decisions will take time. “Time to heal. Time to comprehend. Time to trust. Time to transform. Time to regain what has been lost, and time to move forward” (“A message from President,” 2012).

He wanted to set the record straight that mistakes administrators made were in the past and that, even though they can’t be changed, they can serve as a source of determination to make the university a better place.

Fast forward to a few months after the report was released and Penn State was still communicating the developments it had made despite the negative scrutiny it was receiving as a result of the report and the outcome of the NCAA investigation.

David Gray, a leader on the task force charged with coordinating the university administration’s response to the Freeh report, shared details on Penn State’s progress with the investigator’s recommendations.

“More than a dozen of the report’s recommendations have been substantially addressed and efforts on many more are well underway. Changes already implemented by University leadership include hiring a full-time Clery compliance coordinator and providing Clery Act training for employees; instituting a new policy to limit access to athletic facilities; providing additional resources for the University’s Athletic Compliance Office; and restructuring the Board of Trustees to ensure stronger governance of the University and more communication with constituencies, among other actions” (“Board receives update,” 2012).

Gray also detailed that “the trustees have set the tone for an energetic and thorough response to the Freeh report,” and that they “are working diligently to carefully consider each recommendation. Significant progress already has been made and we anticipate that the vast majority of the recommendations will be implemented over the course of the next year” (“Board receives update,” 2012).

Another press release was published the next month outlining Penn State’s goals of transparency, infrastructure enhancements and improvement of the university’s policies and procedures. The university provided a clear and succinct list of all of the improvements it had made in each category and once again reminded the public that updates will always be made on its progress website (“Penn State takes action,” 2012).

Again, it looked like advancements were being made until another hurdle was thrown into the mix. The NCAA released the sanctions that would be placed on Penn State as punishment for its failure to act.

NCAA Sanctions:

Amid all of the outcry that ensued after the Freeh report was released, the NCAA had more damage to inflict on the university. On July 23, 2012, the organization announced the penalties and corrective actions that would be placed on Penn State as a result of the association's review of the Freeh report. The sanctions imposed on Penn State affected both the university and the football program. The university was required to pay \$60 million over five years into an endowment created to fund programs dedicated to the detection, prevention and treatment of child abuse. A new Athletics Integrity Agreement was introduced that came with a third-party monitor, and a five-year probationary period for the university was enacted as well ("Penn State President," 2012).

In terms of the football program, the team was banned from all post-season play, including bowl games and the Big Ten championship, for four years, there would be a future reduction in the number of scholarships for football student-athletes running through 2018, all wins from 1988-2011 were vacated from Penn State football history and players were granted the ability to transfer from the program without any penalties and be able to play immediately for any other football program ("Penn State President," 2012).

Penn State released a statement that same day announcing that it was welcoming these changes and recommendations. "The NCAA ruling holds the University accountable for the failure of those in power to protect children and insists that all areas of the University community are held to the same high standards of honesty and integrity" ("Penn State President," 2012).

The release also added that "it is important to know we are entering a new chapter at Penn State and making necessary changes. We must create a culture in which people are not afraid to speak up, management is not compartmentalized, all are expected to demonstrate the

highest ethical standards, and the operating philosophy is open, collegial, and collaborative”

(“Penn State President,” 2012).

Before the sanctions were released, there were people questioning whether or not Penn State even deserved a chance to correct its actions. The commentary seemed to be just as split as the public regarding what they think should happen. A column in the New Yorker was headlined, “Does Penn State Deserve the ‘Death Penalty,’” and presented the argument of whether or not the football program is even the one to blame. “The question now is whether it is fair—whether it is humane—for anyone other than the complicit administrators to pay a price. The argument is that if Penn State has to do without football the ones who will suffer will be the players with scholarships, the hotel owners in Happy Valley, and all the little sports that have grown at Penn State in football’s shadow. What did they ever do wrong?” (Sorkin, 2017).

On the other hand, Business Insider published an editorial titled “Why They Should Burn The Penn State Football Program To The Ground,” claiming that “the football program itself is the problem. And as a result, the NCAA should eliminate the program with its so-called ‘death penalty’” (Manfred, 2012).

Christine Brennan, a prominent sports columnist for USA Today, shared her opinion saying, “if the school is truly serious about addressing the atrocities that occurred in its football complex by its so-called leaders in the name of big-time football, it must stop playing football and contemplate college life in Happy Valley without it. Everyone in the Penn State community needs to stop thinking about the game and start thinking about the awful things that happened at the school because of it” (Brennan, 2012).

When the sanctions were released there was an initial stage of shock, and then a mix of confusion, anger and excitement. The school had to pay its fines but the football program took

the biggest hit. The future of student-athletes became uncertain, new head coach Bill O'Brien's job got instantly harder, getting new recruits seemed impossible and even keeping current players was a hard task.

But, after everything that happened, did Penn State have any other choice but to accept these unprecedented penalties? The new administration was on the trail to make up for everything that was done before them. They were in too deep to decline the punishment that was coming their way, as extreme as it was, and the NCAA knew this.

This time around administrators knew that if they wanted to control their own story, they had to speak. For the first few days after the sanctions were delivered, President Erickson did interviews, O'Brien did interviews, the new athletic director did interviews, and they all had the same message: Penn State would get through this and come out better and stronger than before. President Erickson even wrote his own op-ed that was published by the Washington Post to ensure that his narrative was being told.

“With this penalty, it is true that all of us in some way now shoulder the burden for the wrongdoings of others. Students, faculty, staff and alumni who had no involvement, or even knowledge of who Jerry Sandusky was, now share in the responsibility of leaders who failed. To many, it is simply unfair. I think, however, that acceptance of this responsibility will be essential to our ability to lay a new foundation and integral to the long-term character of our institution. In the face of this adversity, I am proud of the many students, faculty and alumni who have banded together with grace, humility and determination.”

He continued, “some will still find it hard to imagine a new chapter in Penn State's history, to see beyond a football program without postseason play or the

story of a school that fell from a pedestal. I urge the skeptics to look harder and see what I see today: an institution that will emerge stronger than ever before, one that will be made great not because of the reputations of a few but because of the resolve, compassion and talents of many. From the headlines alone, it would be forgivable — though wrong — to think that Penn State is little more than an ordinary university with a tradition of athletic success” (“The Way Forward,” 2012).

This became the new narrative for the university, ultimately spreading past the confines of State College. This message defined the new Penn State. The football slogan became “One Team.” Some players left, but the players who stayed became faces of unity and togetherness. Something that was resembled throughout the whole Penn State community. A group of young men who stayed with the team bonded together and helped encourage the majority of the players to stay. Senior running back Michael Zordich addressed the media with a number of his teammates after the sanctions were released. “We want to let the nation know that we’re proud of who we are, we’re the true Penn Staters. We’re going to stick together through this. We’re going to see this thing through and we’re going to do everything we can for the university,” said Zordich (GoPSUtv, 2012).

“This program was not built by one man and this program sure as hell is not going to get torn down by one man... No sanction, no politician is ever going to take away what we got here. None of that is ever going to tear us apart,” added senior linebacker Michael Mauti (GoPSUtv, 2012). This message of perseverance and solidarity spread to students, faculty, alumni and across the nation as a message that Penn State wasn’t going anywhere.

The university also continued its reforms to keep its promise of becoming a leader in the fight against child abuse. A lot of changes were being made around campus. The school implemented a “comprehensive change to the Board of Trustees governance structure, including expansion of committees, public meetings with comment and question periods at formal board voting sessions” (“Penn State takes action,” 2012).

The university also published details of key officials contracts, established the position of chief compliance officer, hired a full-time Clery compliance coordinator, brought in outside consultants to provide Clery Act training to University employees, revised the organizational structure of the athletic department clearly defining responsibility, lines of authority and reporting relationships, conducted mandated reporter training for more than 7,200 employees and volunteers and implemented annual, in-person integrity training for all athletics staff (“Penn State takes action,” 2012).

Today, Penn State prides itself on the reputation it has built as a leader in the fight against abuse. The week after the scandal broke Steve Manuel stood in a classroom and said, “all the magnificent things Penn State has done over generations is on one side of the ledger. Jerry Sandusky is on the other. One has nothing to do with the other, and the university needs a massive campaign to emphasize this. But this is going to take a long time to repair” (Gardiner, 2011). Now, seven years later, Penn State’s image may be restored.

Chapter 4

Other Crises: Michigan State

While Penn State's Sandusky scandal was one that shocked the country for months, there were soon to be more that followed. The Big Ten conference has been struck with scandal after scandal over the last 10 years. Michigan State, Ohio State and Maryland have all seen similarly shocking scandals that took the universities by surprise. However, after Penn State, one would assume that other universities would learn to see the Sandusky scandal as a lesson and implement a crisis communication plan should something like that ever happen on their own campus. After looking at the actions of these universities when their scandals broke, it is clear that they should've taken better notes. For the sake of comparison, here is a case study regarding the sexual abuse scandal that took place at Michigan State with all information sourced to Michigan Radio's coverage of the scandal.

Timeline:

In August 2016, the Indianapolis Star published the first part of an ongoing investigation about the abuse within USA Gymnastics. Through this story, the public learned of the inappropriate behavior that was happening within the organization but didn't know Larry Nassar's name. Nassar, at the time, was a sports physician at Michigan State and a team doctor with USA Gymnastics.

Later that month, a former gymnast at Michigan State filed a complaint against Nassar to the MSU police saying she was assaulted in 2000 when she was just 15 years old. Just a day later, Nassar was reassigned from all of his clinical duties by the university.

After over a month of gathering more stories like the victims' who came forward, the Indy Star published more allegations against Nassar on September 12. USA Gymnastics released a statement in response to the Star report detailing its own connection with Nassar.

“Immediately after learning of athlete concerns about Dr. Nassar in the summer of 2015, Steve Penny, president and CEO of USA Gymnastics, notified law enforcement. We also relieved Dr. Nassar of his duties, and he ceased to be affiliated with USA Gymnastics. USA Gymnastics has cooperated fully with the law enforcement agency since we first notified them of the matter, including – at their request – refraining from making further statements or taking any other action that might interfere with the agency’s investigation. We are grateful to the athletes for coming forward to share their concerns when they did.”

This statement let the public know that USA Gymnastics had known about these allegations a year prior and had taken all the steps that law enforcement had advised it to take. However, Nassar still claimed that he voluntarily resigned from his position with the organization.

Michigan State didn't say anything in response to the article until the next week when MSU officially fired Nassar and released a statement describing its reasoning.

“Larry Nassar was reassigned from his clinical and patient duties Aug. 30 immediately after the university first received notice of the allegations of sexual misconduct. Over the past week, the university received additional information that raised serious concerns about Nassar’s compliance with certain employment requirements. Those requirements were put in place by the university after a 2014 investigation into alleged misconduct by Nassar, and information was received

that indicates those requirements were not consistently met. The university also learned Nassar was not forthcoming when questioned about other previous allegations.”

In this statement, administrators admitted that there was already an investigation into Nassar’s behavior two years ago that nothing came of. When they first heard complaints, they implemented the requirements that they discussed in their statement such as having another physician in the room with Nassar while he was conducting exams, which he didn’t follow.

This was the university’s first mistake that it admitted to. Nothing was reported two years ago when developments regarding Nassar came to light, and even with that prior knowledge, the university still didn’t say anything when more allegations became public. This was very similar to Penn State in the fact that there were questions regarding Sandusky’s behavior dating back to 2001 that the school never said anything about.

Over the next few months, the story didn’t go away. In late November, Nassar was arrested on three counts of criminal sexual assault, and in mid-December, he was arrested for child pornography. None of these charges were related to gymnasts at the university.

Without any accountability for Nassar’s actions against student-athletes, the lawsuits began to pour in. On December 21, a former gymnast included Michigan State in a lawsuit against Nassar saying she complained to two different athletic department trainers about the alleged abuse, but was told it was legitimate medical treatment and “not to discuss what happened with Nassar.” Only 14 days later, 18 former athletes joined together to sue both Nassar and Michigan State.

After the allegations against MSU staff were made public, the university’s women’s gymnastics coach was suspended for discouraging students from reporting Nassar. MSU then

hired a special investigator for internal review and later refused to share the findings with the public. This refusal to publish information made the university look, in the eyes of the public, that it had something to hide. By mid-March of 2017, MSU Title IX investigators had found evidence of sexual abuse.

It took a few more months for the university to respond to criticism. Officials published a transparency website to showcase the steps it was taking amidst this scandal. This was eight months after the allegations against Nassar were published. The public did not respond well to MSU's efforts and took it out on President Lou Anna Simon.

When nothing had happened by December 2017, the media and public figures across the state began to speak out more than ever before. First, the Lansing Journal published an editorial calling for Simon to step down or be fired. Then, the state attorney general began to question the university, asking for its internal report to which Michigan State said there was nothing to share. Next, the statehouse speaker called for Simon to resign, Michigan State's student paper called for her to step down and state legislative leaders expressed their feelings that she needed to step down as well.

Amid all of this opposition, the MSU Board of Trustees openly expressed their support for Simon and asked the attorney general to open an independent review into how the university dealt with the complaints against Nassar.

Over the next week, action was finally being taken. Executive members of USA Gymnastics resigned, the NCAA announced an investigation into MSU's handling of Nassar complaints, President Simon decided to resign, the MSU athletics director stepped down, and the remaining members of the USA Gymnastics board stepped down.

While this was all occurring, over 220 victims of Nassar were delivering impact statements during his trial. The media and everyone else involved could finally put faces and stories to the horrific actions they had heard about. These statements drove the change that needed to happen in the administration at Michigan State and USA Gymnastics.

Over the next year, a congressional committee investigated both USA Gymnastics and the Olympic committee, MSU faculty passed a vote saying they had no confidence in the Board of Trustees, the department of education opened a Title IX investigation into MSU, former president Simon was charged with lying to the police during the investigation and the attorney general's report was released describing how the university fostered a "culture of indifference toward sexual assault" (Winowiecki, 2019).

Comparison:

After looking through the lens of this scandal, it is clear that Michigan State learned little to nothing from the missteps that were taken at Penn State. The media and prosecutors took control of the narrative in this case as well, while Michigan State barely responded to any of their reports or concerns and issued blanket denials of blame.

The calls for university leaders to step down grew ever stronger with state legislators and government figures voicing their opinions, followed by a reaction of support from the university. Unhindered support for those in question was Penn State's initial flaw in the first statement that was released by the university, but the support wasn't carried out almost a year into the scandal as it was at MSU.

The scandals are difficult to compare due to the length of time that passed before actions were taken. In Michigan's case, months passed as information was released and changes were made whereas Penn State's scandal unfolded in a week.

However, while the timelines of these scandals may be different, they initially compared in many ways. Michigan State's attorney fiercely rejected any comparison of Michigan State's actions to Penn State telling Michigan's attorney general, "although both involve horrible actions by disturbed individuals -- Sandusky and Nassar -- the role of the University here is different." He continued, "in the Penn State matter, it appears that high-ranking officials were aware of sexual abuse by an employee, decided to report the abuse to law enforcement, and then changed their minds and did not report the abuse. In the MSU matter, we believe the evidence will show that no MSU official believed that Nassar committed sexual abuse prior to newspaper reports in late summer 2016" (Levenson, 2018).

While that could be true, there seems little doubt that coaches and other officials were told of Nassar's behavior by students prior to the 2016 news reports. One victim even stated in court that rather than being protected she was "humiliated" and "brainwashed" by authorities (Levenson, 2018).

Michigan State failed in the same ways as Penn State by not telling the truth, not telling it first and not telling it themselves. The transparency website is the one small positive similarity that can be drawn between the two universities' handling of their situations, but that was too little too late in both scenarios.

CBS Sports took a different angle on the comparison publishing an editorial with the headline "After its Penn State failures, NCAA must get it right with Larry Nassar, Michigan State." The article looks at the way the NCAA explained its intrusion into the Penn State case as

“cracking down on an out-of-control football culture,” claiming that Penn State’s situation was a “series of unprecedented violations to the association’s constitutions” (Dodd, 2018).

The difference with the association’s involvement with Michigan State is that there was a template this time. The investigation made more sense because the NCAA sent a letter of inquiry to the university making it a formal enforcement matter. The NCAA spelled out MSU’s potential violation of the bylaws in that letter to which the university never provided any information. The association had a reason to get involved and investigate Michigan State with an added opportunity to make up for the mistakes it made with Penn State (Dodd, 2018).

One of the major differences between the handling of both scandals is that the MSU gymnastics team was in no way punished the way the Penn State football team was. This time, the NCAA seemed to recognize that the students had no part in the actions of the abuser, that in some cases, they were the victims. The leadership deemed responsible were the ones who faced the consequences, not the third-parties who were negatively affected by the sanctions applied in Penn State’s case.

When looking at the timeline of Michigan State’s actions, it is clear that a lot more could have been done to prepare for this crisis. It was made known during the investigation that administrators knew of these claims in 2014, just a few years after Penn State was in the middle of its own scandal, one that set a national blueprint of what should and shouldn’t be done. It was a blueprint that Michigan State seemed to ignore. Preferring all along to remain opaque, the university failed to understand that the depth of this scandal required transparency.

Other Crises:

The University of Maryland was faced with a shocking scandal of its own when football player Jordan McNair died due to a heat stroke he incurred during practice one summer afternoon in 2018. Maryland kept quiet after their initial press conference covering the tragedy until, a whole month later, an ESPN report was published regarding the “toxic culture” instilled within the football program detailing the fear and intimidation fostered under head coach DJ Durkin (“The inside story,” 2018).

Due to the backlash in response to the report from the public, the media and the McNair family, Maryland officials decided to place coach Durkin on leave. Eventually, the Board of Regents took over the internal investigation and detailed in its report that, “the Athletics Department lacked a culture of accountability, did not provide adequate oversight of the football program” (Shapiro & West, 2018). However, the board also recommended that Durkin return from leave to which University President Loh agreed. Durkin was reinstated that day which prompted a walkout from several football players at their team meeting.

The angry response that followed Durkin’s return was too much for administration to handle and Durkin was officially fired the next day (Shapiro & West, 2018). Maryland administrators failed to tell the truth themselves allowing the narrative to be stolen from them. Every decision was made as a reaction to media reports and public response without any clear control of their own on the dominant public narrative.

The single Big Ten case that stood out in terms of learning something from Penn State’s actions was Ohio State in its dealing of the domestic abuse allegations regarding wide receivers coach Zach Smith. In contrast with Michigan State, Maryland and Penn State, Ohio State administrators gave the media and public what they wanted in a timely fashion.

This case had a much shorter sequence of events because Ohio State was able to address the problem in the time span of a month rather than dragging out the allegations by not responding to them. The university got ahead of the media whirlwind by conducting its own investigation a week after the scandal began, and took action as soon as the school's investigation was complete. The university was timely in sharing its findings with the public which ceased any criticism because they got the answers they were looking for (Gatto, 2018). When it was found that head coach Urban Meyer had known about the allegations earlier than he had told reporters, Ohio State made him participate in a news conference with the school's president and the athletic director and suspended him for three non-conference games. The effect was that Ohio State addressed the problems, they answered the questions, and while some leaders' behavior could be criticized, they reacted with swift consequences.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

There are many notes that can be taken from Penn State's actions throughout this situation, but a few main points rise above the rest. The first lesson learned would be that the university lost control of the narrative early on because there was no clear message being communicated. After knowing about these allegations and the investigation into Sandusky for months before his indictment, instead of preparing any material to share with the public, administrators were blindsided when the media reported the information first. The administration had ample time to conduct a crisis communications plan and failed to do so, which was ultimately the root of all of their problems.

President Graham Spanier stood behind his staff showing them support and denying the possibility that they did anything wrong, but little other information was forthcoming. It was up to the media to tell the story. Administrators had to react to what the media was saying rather than being the ones to inform their reports. If they had started the communication by detailing what they knew and when they knew it, they would be ahead of narrative with the ability to control it.

Due to its lack of control, Penn State got pressured into big decisions ultimately causing the university to go about them the wrong way. The administrators knew that Paterno's weekly press conference would be their first opportunity to speak since there was no other media availability in the bye week. However, when the day actually came, they still weren't prepared. Whether canceling the conference an hour before its anticipated start time was a result of the

school not having a message they wanted to share, or Paterno not being seen fit to handle the situation, it was a hasty decision that stripped them of another opportunity to tell the story in their own words. Now, the story was being told through their actions which left a lot of things up to interpretation by the media.

Joe Paterno was fired over the phone after a rushed vote at a Board of Trustees meeting late at night. While it was an attempt to harness the narrative away from the coach who had set the terms of his own departure by announcing his retirement, it was another hurried conclusion that may have hurt them more than it helped. Firing someone who has had such a large impact on the university with a few sentences in a phone call was not the way to appease the already frustrated fans and alumni. It was a quick-minded solution intended to silence the critics who believed that Paterno didn't do enough when he could have, but it could have been done in a way that didn't attract even more negative press to the program.

After the initial few weeks, Penn State was beaten down too hard to continue to fight against the opposing narratives that had presented themselves over time. The new leadership knew it had to get things back on track quickly and that it could do this by talking, by being transparent and listening to what the public needed. This is when major improvement was seen in the university administrator's communication tactics, but not only did they talk, they also acted. Even in the period of pending investigations and criminalizing results, their communication still grew stronger.

From looking at other Big Ten schools that have been placed in similar situations it is clear that these lessons are hard to learn. Michigan State, Maryland and Ohio State all committed similar mistakes to Penn State with reactionary decisions and leaders failing to share what they knew when they knew it.

In the years since 2011, Penn State has stuck to its pledge and it is a better university for that reason. The public relations lessons that Penn State itself and the world can take away from this situation are clear. It all goes back to Steve Manuel's mantra: tell the truth, tell it first and tell it yourself. While those three points may seem simple, it is easy to get lost in the optics and challenges of a crisis.

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Education

Advertising and Public Relations
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Sports Communication Experience:

Penn State Athletics/ *Sports Information Student Assistant* / 2018- Present

Work with multiple athletic programs assisting with media operations, statistic tracking and press events

Conduct research to assist in writing media guides, press releases, feature stories, game previews and social media content

Contribute content and assist with maintenance on the main Penn State Athletics website

Heinz Field/ *Corporate Events Intern* / 2019

Assisted in the planning and execution of private events hosted in the stadium throughout the offseason and preseason

Communicated with clients from the inquiry stage through the completion of the event

Aided in the entirety of event day procedures for city-wide attractions such as the Garth Brooks Stadium Tour and Steelers preseason games

State College Spikes / *Marketing and Promotions Intern* / 2018

Responsible for executing all in-game promotions and on-field entertainment and contests

Facilitated community events and grassroots marketing needs throughout the course of the season

Assisted in customer service and front office operations including aiding the sales team

Penn State Athletics / *Customer Relations Representative* / 2018

Nurtured and enhanced the relationship between Penn State Athletics and customers through daily communication

Provided high quality service and support by answering questions and resolving problems

Handled the day-to-day operations of the ticket office to assist season ticket holders of multiple varsity sports

Extracurricular Activities:

Penn State Dance Marathon / *Hospitality Promotions Captain* / 2018, 2019

Organized all aspects of promotional events with local businesses to benefit the largest student-run philanthropy in the world

Built and fostered relationships with donors in order to obtain necessary donations for events throughout the year

Lead a committee of 26 students teaching them how to perform their roles throughout the year and during THON weekend

Association for Women in Sports Media / *Executive Board Member* / 2018, 2019

Managed and created content for the chapter's blog featuring the organization's activities

Assisted in running bi-weekly member meetings, presenting information, tracking attendance and membership points

Administered and maintained the chapter's website while overseeing two website student chairs

Awards: Dean's List recognition every semester from Fall 2016 – Fall 2019

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