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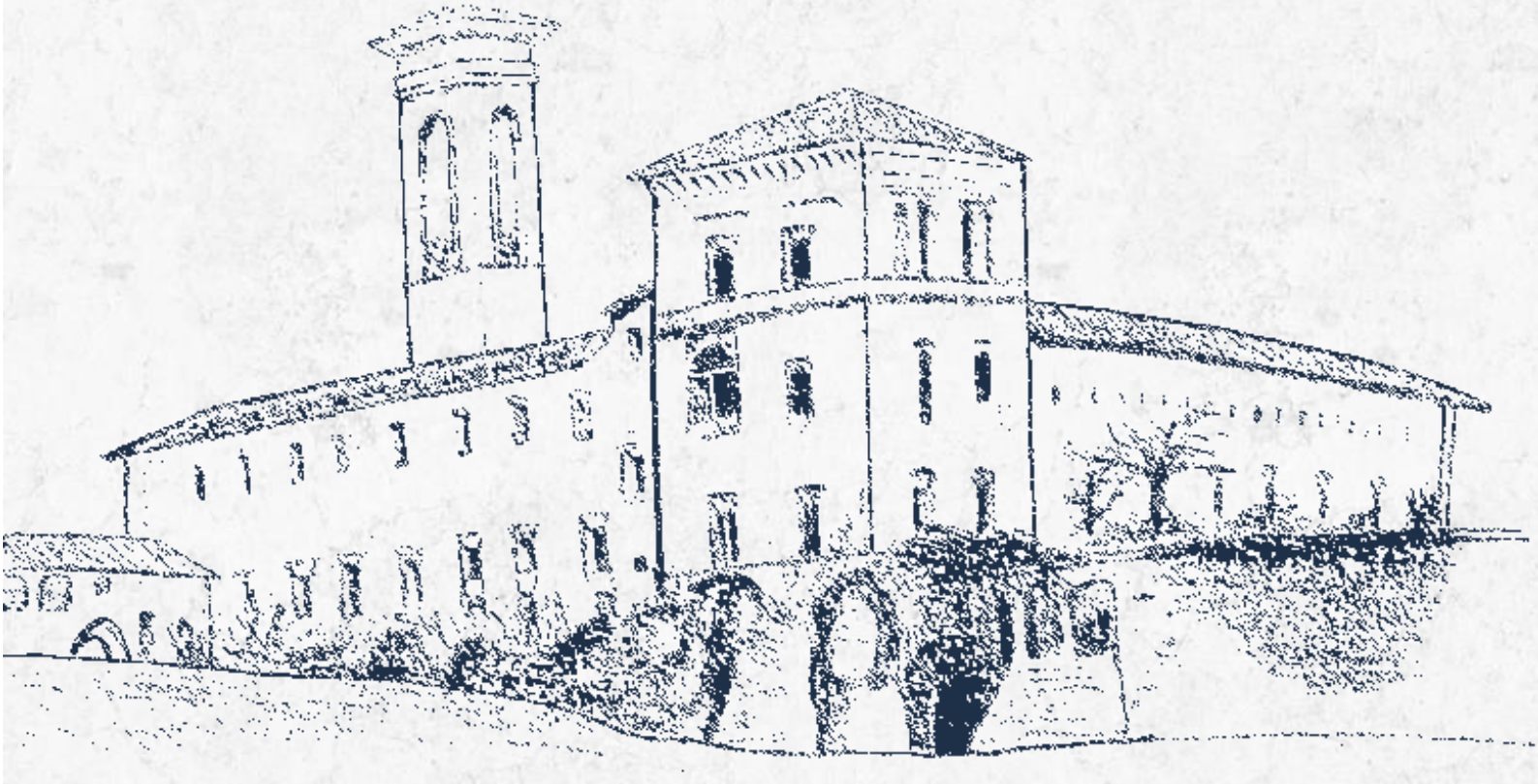

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The Contested Realm of Reorganisation Crises: A Rhetorical Arena Approach to Understanding Communication in the Context of Workforce Restructuring

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Abstract: This paper explores organisational crises resulting from company restructuring and reorganisation, highlighting them as a crucial area for crisis communication research. It addresses the limited academic focus on restructuring crises compared to other types, such as industrial accidents or environmental scandals, and argues for their significant reputational implications.

Building on Frandsen and Johansen's (2016) multivocal framework, the study investigates how actors like trade unions, media, administrative bodies, and companies interact to shape narratives and influence outcomes during restructuring. Trade unions, in particular, play a crucial role in challenging corporate narratives and shaping public opinion, potentially turning organisational changes into reputational crises with financial and operational consequences.

The paper concludes by urging further research into contextual factors—such as income, education, industrial relations culture, and company reputation—that affect trade unions' power in the rhetorical arena, aiming to develop a comprehensive framework for analysing and managing reorganisation crises.

Keywords: *crisis communication; restructuring; reorganisation; rhetorical arena theory; trade unions*

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the Western world has confronted three significant crises: the global financial crisis of 2007–2008, the sovereign debt crisis of 2011–2012, and the Covid-19 pandemic. The current geopolitical climate, sparked by the conflict on the border between Eastern Europe and Russia, and the recent upsurge of conflicts in the Middle East, adds another layer of complexity, with implications that remain difficult to fully grasp.

These crises have contributed to a decline in competitiveness for numerous companies, leading many of the largest firms to initiate reorganisation plans to improve performance[1]. Common strategies include downsizing, plant closures, business terminations, and relocations, often resulting in large-scale layoffs aimed at reducing labour costs.

Moreover, restructuring strategies are frequently employed not only in response to economic and financial crises but also due to technological advancements and legal pressures that compel organisations to adopt rapid, cost-cutting measures. A notable example is the tech sector, which has witnessed a wave of massive layoffs over the past two years[2].

To describe these conditions, terms coined a few years ago, such as "polycrisis", "metacrisis", and "permacrisis", have re-emerged to reflect the pervasive nature of crises in the modern business environment. In this context, the practice of managing these uncertainties through temporary or permanent layoffs remains widespread as firms continue to navigate market uncertainties, even as the economy recovers[3]. While primarily rooted in analyses of natural disasters rather than human-enacted economic downturns, Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* (2007) remains relevant in highlighting how crises can be strategically exploited to advance neoliberal restructuring. According to Klein, both private and

[1] See R. McDevitt, C. Giapponi & D. M. Houston, D. M., *Organisational downsizing during an economic crisis: Survivors' and victims' perspectives* in *Organisation Management Journal, 10*(3), 2013, 227-239; L. Federman, L. Grimm, K. Morley, M. Schneidereit & E. Scott, *Jumping the line: Priming restructuring transactions during the Covid-19 crisis*, in *Butterworths Journal of International Banking and Financial Law (Jones Day)*, February 2021.

[2] See U. Kumar & G. Gupta, *Study on layoff of employees in big tech organisations* in *IJFMR, 5*(2), March-April (2023). See also V. Palladino, 2023, January 20, *Google parent Alphabet to cut 12,000 jobs, the biggest layoffs in company history.* Time.com; K. Conger, M. Isaac & S. Frenkel, (2025, January 14) *Meta to cut 5% of its workers in new round of layoffs.* TheNewYorkTimes.com.

[3] Wharton Staff, 2016, April 12. *How layoffs hurt companies.* Retrieved from https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/how-layoffs-cost-companies/

public powerful entities leverage chaotic situations to implement economic policies and strategies that might otherwise face significant resistance.

Regardless of intent, companies must contend with potential reputational damage stemming from media coverage[4], particularly in the context of restructuring. Large-scale reassessments of organisational structures and staffing plans—especially within major corporations—frequently attract significant media scrutiny, turning what might be perceived as routine corporate decisions into reputational crises.

In any case, companies must manage potential reputational damage from media coverage, which is particularly true in the context of restructuring. Indeed, large-scale reassessments of organisational charts and staffing plans, especially within major corporations, can attract significant media attention[5], leading to a reputational crisis[6].

Paradoxically, these crises can escalate the costs associated with reorganisation in various ways[7]. The ability of trade unions to influence these decisions and engage stakeholders, including the media, becomes critical. In this context, industrial relations have become a battleground for ideological debate, particularly as unions seek to expose how reported crises are often used as a pretext to pursue efficiency gains[8].

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[4] D. P. Millar & R. L. Heath (eds.), *Responding to Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication*, Routledge, 2003.

[5] C. T. Christen, "The restructuring and reengineering of AT&T: Analysis of a public relations crisis using organisational theory", *Public Relations Review*, 31(2), 2005, p. 239-251; T. Brimeyer, G. W. Muschert & S. Lippmann, "Longitudinal modeling of frame changing and media salience: Coverage of worker displacement, 1980–2007", *International Journal of Communication*, 6, 2012, p. 2094–2116; L. Caruso, C. Cepernich & F. Roncarolo, "Le rappresentazioni mediali della crisi tra bisogni informativi e strategie politico-comunicative", *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 1, 2012, p. 137-168; P. Orrù, "Il discorso sulla crisi economica nella stampa italiana (2007-2017)", *Rhesis. International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature*, 9(1), 2018, p. 44-68.

[6] N. A. Dentchev & A. Heene, "Managing the reputation of restructuring corporations: Send the right signal to the right stakeholder", *Journal of Public Affairs: An International Journal*, 4(1), 2004, p. 56-72.

[7] D. Flanagan & K. O'Shaughnessy, "The effect of layoffs on firm reputation", *Journal of Management*, 31, 2005, p. 445-463; Y. Hatakeyama, "What Kind of Crisis Communication Messages Benefit Corporate Reputation on High and Minimal Responsibility Case?", in *Advances in Advertising Research XIV: Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger: Advertising and Communication between Immediacy and Sustainability*, Wiesbaden, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2024, p. 243-253.

[8] F. Nespoli, *Fondata sul lavoro, la comunicazione politica e sindacale del lavoro che cambia*, Bergamo, ADAPT University Press, 2018; C. R. Martin, *Framed!: Labor and the Corporate Media*, Cornell University Press, 2004.

Although some scholars have reconceptualised corporate restructuring by highlighting the pivotal role of public affairs activities in addressing both market and non-market pressures[9], this literature rarely explores the role of trade unions and their public relations efforts in managing the reputation of restructuring organisations.

Drawing on the concept of the Rhetorical Arena—conceived by Frandsen and Johansen—this paper aims to fill this gap by illustrating the various actors who may participate in this arena and their respective roles in corporate crises triggered by workforce reorganisation[10]. Particular attention is paid to trade unions and the influence they wield over other actors, primarily by exerting reputational pressure on multiple stakeholders.

Moreover, by recognising the deliberate and strategic nature of such crises, this study seeks to address the disproportionate attention given to other forms of corporate crises, rather than those with occupational consequences. In doing so, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of crisis typologies in organisational and public communication contexts.

1. The Place of Reorganisational Crises in Crisis Communication Theories: A Rationale

Several conditions justify examining a reorganisation plan within the realm of crisis communication, with the media and trade unions playing pivotal roles in shaping and interpreting these dynamics. After establishing the link between restructuring and reputation, I argue here that a primary reason why reorganisation plans and restructuring (as defined in this paper) can be analysed through a crisis communication lens is their deliberate nature. While not every deliberate restructuring decision culminates in a reputational crisis, it often carries a reputational threat. Specifically, the intent behind such actions can incite reputational challenges, particularly if stakeholders view them as unjust or irresponsible.

[9] Dentchev, N. A., & Heene, A. (2004). Managing; Ahlstrand, R., & Rydell, A. (2017). Corporate social responsibility in connection with business closures and downsizing: A literature review. *Contemporary Management Research, 13*(1), 53-78.

[10] See F. Frandsen & W. Johansen, *Organisational Crisis Communication: A Multivocal Approach*, Sage, 2016; F. Frandsen & W. Johansen, "Rhetorical arena theory: Revisited and expanded", in *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, 2022, p. 169-181.

1.1 Crises of Competitiveness and the Reorganisational Response: Why "a Crisis"?

The management literature has addressed crises of competitiveness and the resulting corporate distress[11]. These corporate crises can be driven not only by economic and financial difficulties but also by technological, political, and legal challenges—all of which can significantly affect a firm's performance and survival, often leading to restructuring.

In this paper, I focus on organisational restructuring that impacts the internal structure of the firm[12]. I use the term "reorganisation" broadly to refer to any organisational change that affects employees—such as downsizing, plant closures, and offshoring—often involving layoffs or the relocation of workers[13]. This interpretation aligns closely with Cascio (2021) in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Business and Management*, which notes that "common forms of corporate restructuring include downsizing, which may involve natural attrition, buyouts, involuntary layoffs, or early retirement offers to adjust workforce competencies to fit the overall strategy"[14].

It is important to note that the strategies mentioned above represent only a subset of possible options, and other paths—such as wage freezes, wage

[11] L. Schweizer & A. Nienhaus, "Corporate distress and turnaround: Integrating the literature and directing future research", *Business Research*, 10, 2017, p. 3–47.

[12] Management literature differentiates between financial restructuring, which typically involves changes to a company's financial structure (See H. Singh, "Challenges in researching corporate restructuring", *Journal of Management Studies*, 30, 1993, p. 147-172; K. Tang, "Restructuring: Mergers and acquisition", in *Leadership and Change Management*, 2019, p. 85-98) and organisational restructuring, which impacts the company's internal organisation (E. H. Bowman, H. Singh, M. Useem & R. Bhadury, "When does restructuring improve economic performance?", *California Management Review*, 41(2), 1999, p. 33-54).

[13] Alternative terms for these procedures include "workforce restructuring", "workforce reorganisation", "organisational restructuring", and "redundancy plans".

[14] In scientific literature, the term "downsizing" is frequently used to describe organisational changes driven by competitiveness challenges that result in layoffs. This typically occurs when companies seek to reduce costs due to a decline in demand for their products or services, a shift in business strategy, or an economic downturn. Other terms used interchangeably with "downsizing" include "rightsizing," "smart sizing," "workforce reduction," or "reduction in force" (RIF), while the US Office of personnel management uses the term "workforce restructuring" (OPM). From the HR management perspective, these terms generally refer to the temporary or permanent termination of employment for reasons unrelated to an individual's job performance (A. Batra, "Downsizing, rightsizing or smart-sizing: A potion for organisational performance", *Delhi Business Review*, 20(2), 2019, p. 57-66.

retrenchment, or short-time working schemes—can be pursued. In considering these alternatives, the European literature particularly emphasises the notion of "responsible restructuring", which highlights the importance of "a fair process of restructuring, as well as measures to ameliorate the negative effects of job losses and to help displaced workers back into the labour market"[15].

Of course, one could argue that reorganisation or restructuring is more appropriately examined within the domain of change management rather than crisis management. Indeed, academic discourse has normalised downsizing and layoffs as standard business practices, even under favourable economic conditions[16]. However, this perspective underscores that restructuring may be a deliberate choice, not necessarily linked to manifest corporate distress. In these instances, the concept of responsible restructuring highlights that some restructuring initiatives seek to enhance competitiveness by reducing labour costs, rather than pursuing alternatives like production innovation or employee training. Consequently, such a cost-cutting approach may be seen as an irresponsible shortcut to competitiveness.

Ultimately, the concept of "responsibility" underscores the central role of human resource management and employee relations within corporate social responsibility (CSR), influencing environmental management, employee support, organisational climate, and overall employee well-

[15] See S. Johnstone, "Human resource management in recession: Restructuring and alternatives to downsizing in times of crisis", *Human Resource Management Journal*, 34(1), 2024, p. 138-157. When evaluating these alternatives, Johnstone utilizes a model proposed by Teague and Roche ("Recessionary bundles: HR practices in the Irish economic crisis", *Human Resource Management Journal*, 24(2), 2014, p. 176-192., p. 180) that differentiates between pure restructuring, employment stabilisation, and responsible restructuring. In pure restructuring, "firms focus on achieving rapid payroll savings, predominantly through downsizing." Employment stabilization, on the other hand, involves "a commitment by firms to avoid compulsory redundancies, opting instead for alternative cost-saving measures such as wage reductions, shorter working hours, voluntary redundancies, and terminating contracts with agency workers". Notably, the concept of responsible restructuring has been further refined into a comprehensive framework by McLachlan (C. J. McLachlan, "Developing a framework for responsible downsizing through best fit: The importance of regulatory, procedural, communication, and employment responsibilities", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 33, 2021, p. 1-29).

[16] Wharton Staff, *How layoffs*

being[17]. As noted by Ahlstrand and Rydell (2017), substantial research has indeed examined the role of CSR activities in corporate restructuring[18]. Because CSR is a key component of corporate reputation, organisational restructuring can therefore pose a significant reputational risk.

I will not delve deeply into the corporate reputation literature, nor will I address the issue of confusion among the concepts of corporate identity, image, and reputation[19], as these topics are beyond the scope of this paper. For the purposes of this discussion, it is sufficient to refer to the traditional definition by Fombrun and Van Riel, which describes corporate reputation as "a collective representation of [a company's] past actions and results that describes the firm's ability to deliver valued outcomes to multiple stakeholders"[20]. It is important to clarify, however, that even when adopting this definition, corporate reputation extends beyond immediate or future economic outcomes[21]. Indeed, it should also be understood as a strategic resource encompassing stakeholders' interpretations and expectations regarding a company's social responsibility[22]. This interpretation can ultimately influence economic performance, prompting companies to reconsider their plans and, in some cases, increasing the costs associated with reorganisation.

This distinction extends beyond the notion that companies implementing layoffs are, by definition, facing challenges. It also pertains to how a company communicates its commitment to social responsibility,

[17] L. Preuss, A. Haunschild & D. Matten, "The rise of CSR: Implications for HRM and employee representation", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 20(4), 2009, p. 953-973..

[18] See Z. Karake-Shalhoub, "An examination of the impact of organisational downsizing and discrimination activities on corporate social responsibility as measured by a company's reputation index", *Management Decision*, 36(3), 1998, p. 206-216; Z. Karake-Shalhoub, *Organisational Downsizing, Discrimination, and Corporate Social Responsibility*, Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 1999; P. Heugens & H. Schenk, "Rethinking corporate restructuring", *Journal of Public Affairs*, 4, 2004, p. 87-101; L. Zu, *Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Restructuring and Firm's Performance*, Springer, 2008; C. Janssen, S. Sen & C. Bhattacharya, "Corporate crises in the age of corporate social responsibility", *Business Horizons*, 58, 2015, p. 183-192.

[19] M. L. Barnett, J. M. Jermier & B. A. Lafferty, "Corporate reputation: The definitional landscape", *Corporate Reputation Review*, 9(1), 2006, p. 26–38.

[20] C. Fombrun & C. van Riel, "The reputational landscape", *Corporate Reputation Review*, 1(1-2), 1997, p. 10.

[21] C. J. Fombrun, "Corporate reputations as economic assets", in M. A. Hitt, R. E. Freeman & J. S. Harrison (Eds.), *The Blackwell Handbook of Strategic Management*, Wiley Online Library, 2005, p. 289–312.

[22] L. P. K. Adeosun & R. A. Ganiyu, "Corporate reputation as a strategic asset", *Interdisciplinary Journal of Business and Social Science*, 4(2), 2013, p. 220-228.

particularly regarding the conditions of its employees. Consequently, ethical considerations take on a central role when restructuring plans are subjected to public scrutiny[23].

1.1.2 So, What is "a Crisis"?

These observations form the basis for understanding why it is appropriate to discuss "crises" in the context of a company undertaking collective layoffs and other forms of reorganisation, even when a genuine competitiveness crisis is absent. The question is not new, but it merits further consideration, as the study of reorganisation crises offers a lens through which we can reflect on the evolution of crisis communication research. As Michael Kent pointed out in 2010:

> An organisation laying off thousands of employees is often described as a 'crisis', and yet, from the standpoint of the organisation, laying off thousands of employees will allow the organisation to 'better compete'. Thus, from the organisation's standpoint, how is a layoff a crisis? Since employee layoffs often happen when an organisation shifts its manufacturing overseas or moves its production to less costly locations, layoffs constitute hundreds or thousands of individual 'stakeholder crises', or a union crisis, but not an organisational crisis[24].

As implied by Kent, the study of reorganisation crises serves as a means of exploring the very nature of crises. Due to the characteristics of the context we live in, the concept of crisis itself is evolving within crisis communication theories. Some contemporary perspectives suggest that crises are no longer seen merely as unpredictable events, but as inherent aspects of ordinary business life. This shift in understanding redefines how we interpret not just individual events, but entire eras characterised by continuous crisis. Building on Ulrich Beck's theory of the "risk society", crisis communication theorists Finn Frandsen and Winni Johansen place the possibility of describing our society as a "crisis society" at the centre of their reflections in elaborating a multivocal approach to crisis communication. More broadly, in the social sciences, terms coined a few years ago, such as "polycrisis", "metacrisis", and

[23] V. Potocan & Z. Nedelko, "The behavior of organisations in economic crises: Integration, interpretation, and research development", *Journal of Business Ethics*, 174, 2021, p. 805–823.

[24] M. L. Kent, "What is a public relations 'crisis'? Refocusing crisis", in W. T. Coombs & S. J. Holladay (eds.), *The Handbook of Crisis Communication*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, p. 708.

"permacrisis", are also reappearing collectively to illustrate the evolving nature of contemporary crises[25]. As noted by the Italian manager Maurizio Castro, the most relevant term for the discourse I am articulating here is Stephen S. Cohen's concept of "permacrisis", which was highlighted as Collins Dictionary's Word of the Year for 2022[26]. It describes a state of perpetual crisis in which instability and challenges are continuous rather than isolated[27].

Clearly, Kent is not suggesting that public relations professionals should ignore the implications of crises like layoffs on employees or fail to consider how to minimise the stakeholder consequences. Rather, he highlights that crises should be reframed from being seen merely as "major occurrences with potentially negative outcomes" to understanding them as events that significantly shape organisational actions, external relations, and have long-term implications for organisational climate and profitability[28].

Kent's perspective offers both elements for problematisation and a potential solution to the question he poses. He suggests that when we refer to a crisis in the context of restructuring, multiple crises may be involved—such as stakeholder crises, union crises, or organisational crises. He further argues that a company may not perceive restructuring as a crisis but rather as a solution. From this viewpoint, the primary impact falls on certain stakeholders or unions, whose worker-protection function is threatened (particularly if one adopts a simplistic view that their role is solely to prevent layoffs[29]). However, Kent's analysis does not explicitly account for the potential emergence of reputational crises linked to

[25] Edgar Morin and Anne-Brigitte Kern's term "policrisis" (*Terre-Patrie*, Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1993) is inherently political, highlighting the interconnectedness of global crises and demonstrating how issues are interlinked and mutually reinforcing. By contrast, the term "metacrisis"—credited to Nicholas Hedlund and Sean Esbjörn-Hargens—functions as a meta-theoretical concept, addressing the interdisciplinary challenges of responding to these intertwined crises and underscoring the complexity and systemic nature of our approaches (Weisser, *Problem shifting: An expression of the metacrisis*. 2023).

[26] M. Castro, "Il governo della post-merger integration nei nuovi scenari competitivi", *TeMa*, (2), 2024, CUAO Business School.

[27] G. Brown, M. El-Erian, M. Spence & R. Lidow, *Permacrisis: A Plan to Fix a Fractured World*, Simon and Schuster, 2023.

[28] Kent, *op. cit.*, p. 709.

[29] Cf. G. Brown, M. El-Erian, M. Spence & R. Lidow, *Permacrisis: A Plan to Fix a Fractured World*, Simon and Schuster, 2023.

restructuring, particularly those arising from allegations that the restructuring plan is irresponsible or unfair[30].
The element that helps clarify why a reputational crisis might emerge, thus enabling one to discuss crises in the context of restructuring from the perspective of crisis communication, is Kent's reference to the "standpoint". This implies that a reorganisation crisis is always a specific framing adopted by an actor. The possibility that a reorganisation might evolve into a reputational crisis depends on how the restructuring is framed and perceived.
This aspect is also reflected in Fombrun and Van Riel's definition of corporate reputation, which states that it "gauges a firm's relative standing both internally with employees and externally with its stakeholders, in both its competitive and institutional environments" [31]. In the context of a reorganisation, both inside and outside the company, few may justify the organisation's actions as a response to an external competitiveness crisis. Competitiveness is often perceived as the company's natural goal—achieved, in this case, through the exploitation of workers and the reduction of labour costs. From this perspective, the employment effects of such decisions are the crisis itself.

1.1.3 The Relevance of a Multivocal Approach

To build upon this intuition, it is appropriate to adopt a multivocal approach. Specifically, restructuring can be examined from the perspective of crisis communication because, from the standpoint of certain voices, it constitutes a form of crisis.
I will adopt the approach of Frandsen and Johansen, who introduced the rhetorical arena theory in their seminal work *Retorik og Krisekommunikation* (Rhetoric and Crisis Communication), published in 2000, with a "revisited and expanded" version in 2022. They argue that crisis situations involve a high degree of communicative complexity due to the diverse participants or stakeholders involved. Unlike the straightforward, linear communication typically seen between an organisation and its stakeholders, the crisis arena includes numerous voices, each representing unique stakes and agendas. The theory reflects the socially constructed

[30] This complexity is compounded by the possibility that trade unions might strike or initiate legal action, thereby escalating the restructuring process into an organisational crisis. I will explore this topic in more detail later.
[31] Fombrun & Van Riel's, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

nature of crises, where some voices may support, while others critique, the organisation's response.
As a result, multiple communication processes occur either simultaneously or sequentially among various senders and receivers, further increasing communicative complexity[32]. This framework underscores the significant role of multiple actors—including the media, trade unions, trade associations, and administrative entities—in shaping the discourse and framing specific crises[33].

1.2 Re-organisational Crises as Deliberate Crises

Once this has been clarified, we can position reputational crises linked to reorganisation plans within Coombs and Holladay's taxonomy of crisis types[34]. This framework allows us to identify and contextualise the specific nature of such crises, highlighting their peculiarities within the broader theories developed in the field of crisis communication.
These theories typically deal with crises characterised by unpredictable events that threaten stakeholder expectations and can seriously affect an organisation's performance, leading to negative outcomes[35]. Common examples include sexual harassment incidents, industrial and workplace accidents, natural disasters, and emissions scandals. Therefore, it is important to emphasise that reputational crises arising from reorganisation communication occupy a distinct position within the classification of crises in crisis communication theories. Indeed, unpredictability and the impact on consumer utility, which are the general focus of crisis communication, do not fully apply to this kind of crisis[36].

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[32] F. Frandsen & W. Johansen, *Rhetorical arena*, p. 170.
[33] F. Frandsen & W. Johansen, *Rhetorical arena*, p., p. 171
[34] W. T. Coombs & S. J. Holladay, "Helping crisis managers protect reputational assets: Initial tests of the situational crisis communication theory", *Management Communication Quarterly*, 16, 2002, p. 165–186; W. T. Coombs & S. J. Holladay, "Reasoned Action in Crisis Communication: An Attribution Theory—Based Approach to Crisis Management," in D. P. Millar & R. L. Heath (eds.), *Responding to Crisis: A Rhetorical Approach to Crisis Communication*, 1st ed., New York, Routledge, 2004.
[35] W. T. Coombs, Conceptualizing crisis communication," in *Handbook of Risk and Crisis Communication*, Routledge, 2020 (original work published 2008), pp. 99–118.
[36] As for the second characteristic of crises (consumer utility), we should note that redundancy announcements do not directly affect consumer utility in the same way as unpredictable crises. I will return to this point later.

Regarding the first characteristic—unpredictability—I have already noted that layoffs are typically the result of planned managerial decisions, which grants the firm some control over both the timing and communication of such actions[37]. Unlike crises caused by accidents or natural disasters, reorganisation is ultimately seen as a management decision by certain actors within the rhetorical arena, thereby intensifying perceptions of culpability and moral responsibility.

We can therefore place the crisis associated with reorganisation within the intentional cluster. The intentional cluster involves strong attributions of responsibility, where the organisation is held primarily or entirely accountable. This is similar to cases of human-error accidents (e.g., industrial accidents caused by human error) or organisational misdeeds.

Thus, even in cases of downsizing and layoffs not necessarily tied to overt corporate distress, the company may nonetheless face what Coombs and Holladay term[38] a "paracrisis": "a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organisation with irresponsible or unethical behaviour."

Therefore, I propose that reorganisation can always be viewed, to some extent, as an "intentional" crisis, depending on the perspectives of the actors participating in its communication.

This categorisation is crucial because it implies that intermediaries, including trade unions and the media, are more likely to attribute responsibility directly to the company, seeing the crisis as intentional and avoidable.

In conclusion, it is the presence of an actor attributing culpability to the company that transforms what was merely a financial or organisational practice into a reputational crisis. Ultimately, this is what we mean when we refer to a "crisis" in the context of a company engaging in layoffs and other collective measures as part of reorganisation processes.

2. The Place of Trade Unions Within the Reorganisation Rhetorical Arena: A Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The relatively limited academic attention given to restructuring crises—compared to more dramatic events such as industrial accidents or emissions scandals—highlights the need for further investigation into how

[37] V. Landsman & S. Stremersch, "The commercial consequences of collective layoffs: Close the plant, lose the brand?", *Journal of Marketing*, 84(3), 2020, pp. 122–141.

[38] W. T. Coombs & J. S. Holladay, "The paracrisis: The challenges created by publicly managing crisis prevention," *Public Relations Review*, 38(3), 2012, p. 402.

these situations are framed by trade unions through their public relations efforts.

Indeed, I have already defined what workforce reorganisation is and why it can be analysed from the perspective of crisis communication. However, it is still necessary to clarify why, in the context of a company implementing reorganisation processes, trade unions are crucial in enacting a reputational crisis, rather than merely an organisational one.

In the following section, I draw on the concept of the Rhetorical Arena, which is conceptualised as a two-layered model by Frandsen and Johansen[39]. The macro-component encompasses all actors and voices communicating in the arena from the onset of a crisis until its resolution, while the micro-component represents each individual communication process (i.e., every instance a sender conveys a message). In this paper, I focus exclusively on the first layer: the macro-component. In doing so, I aim to illustrate the various actors who may participate in the rhetorical arena and their respective roles in organisational crises, with particular emphasis on trade unions and the influence they can exert on other actors.

2.1 The Concept of Framing in a Rhetorical Arena

To achieve this, another conceptual premise is necessary: clarifying what a "frame" is. I have already specified what I mean by "framing," a term widely employed across various social science disciplines. This is particularly evident when framing theory is adopted for media representation analysis, given the argument that the way news is reported can influence how audiences interpret it. This perspective differs from other approaches—such as agenda-setting and priming theory—by emphasising how discourse is represented, rather than simply which topics are selected. Thus, the central question shifts from "Which topics are we led to believe in?" to "How are we encouraged to interpret a given issue?" and "How should we think about a certain topic?"[40].

I have also previously explained how this concept can be applied to industrial relations communication[41] by adopting a framing analysis from a

[39] See F. Frandsen & W. Johansen, *op. cit.*, 2022.

[40] See. D. McQuail, *McQuail's mass communication theory*. Sage, 2005.

[41] F. Nespoli, "Framing the crisis in industrial relations. Contrasting the 'Fiat case' and FCA-UAW agreement", *E-Journal of International and Comparative Labour Studies*, 7(3), 2018b, pp. 109–142; F. Nespoli, "When labour goes populist. How Italian populist

rhetorical perspective[42]. For the purposes of this discussion, it suffices to recall that, from this viewpoint, framing functions similarly to the rhetorical concept of "topics." Simply put, a frame can be regarded as a set of argumentative premises; hence, the framing process parallels the classical rhetorical notion of *inventio*—the systematic search for commonplaces, premises, core values, and their hierarchies[43]. In Kuypers' words, "framing is the process whereby communicators act to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some facts made more noticeable than others" [44].

2.2 Corporate Crises, Mediatisation, and Intermediaries

2.2.1 The Media

The mediatisation of corporate crises has attracted significant scholarly attention across various countries[45]. An and Gower's study, in particular,

leaders frame the labour market and industrial relations on social media", *E-Journal of International and Comparative Labour Studies*, 8(2), 2019, pp. 4–46.

[42] J. A. Kuypers, "Framing analysis from a rhetorical perspective," in P. D'Angelo & J. A. Kuypers (eds.), Doing News Framing Analysis, Routledge, 2010, pp. 286–311. This approach is also employed by Valentini et al. in analysing trade union framing for lobbying (C. Valentini, Ø. Ihlen, I. Somerville, K. Raknes & S. Davidson, "Trade unions and lobbying: Fighting private interests while defending the public interest?", *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 2020, pp. 4913–4931).

[43] Ch. Perelman & L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, Traité de l'argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique, Paris, PUF, 1958; (Italian translation by C. Schick, M. Mayer & E. Barassi, Trattato dell'argomentazione. La nuova retorica, Torino, Einaudi, 1966, 1989, 2001), p. 90.

[44] Kuypers, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

[45] Often, these crises are examined within the broader context of economic crises and their media representation. See M. Hollister, "Speaking of downsizing: The use of the term 'downsizing' in American news media, 1975–2007," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, San Francisco, CA, August 2009; **E.** K. Olsson, "Defining crisis news events," *Nordicom Review*, 31(1), 2010, pp. 87–101; F. Squazzoni & M. Castellani, "Media e crisi economica: *Instrumentum diaboli* o guardiani del faro?", *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 4, 2011, pp. 547–570; A. Cawley, "Sharing the pain or shouldering the burden? News-media framing of the public sector and the private sector in Ireland during the economic crisis, 2008–2010," *Journalism Studies*, 13(4), 2011, pp. 600–615; L. Caruso, C. Cepernich & F. Roncarolo, "Le rappresentazioni mediali della crisi tra bisogni informativi e strategie politico-comunicative," *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 1, 2012, pp.137–168; A. Damstra & R. Vliegenthart, "(Un)covering the economic crisis? Over-time and inter-media differences in salience and framing," *Journalism Studies*, 19(7), 2016, pp. 983–1003;

highlights how news media employ specific frames when portraying crises, observing that, in cases where a crisis is deemed preventable—such as many restructuring scenarios—the media are more likely to use an attribution of responsibility frame, a conflict frame (which highlights disagreements among the actors involved in the crisis), and a morality frame (emphasising the moral perspective on the crisis)[46]. Overall, the attribution of responsibility frame is the most frequently used in crisis news, enabling the media to hold the company accountable in the public eye.

While the broader study of corporate crises in media discourse is well documented, the specific focus on restructuring crises has resulted in fewer—although highly relevant—publications in certain national contexts, such as Canada[47], the United States[48], Australia[49], Finland[50], Belgium[51], Italy[52] and Nigeria[53]. According to these studies, a dynamic of

P. Orrù, "Il discorso sulla crisi economica nella stampa italiana (2007-2017)," *Rhesis. International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature*, 9(1), 2018, pp. 44–68; D. Vogler & F. Meissner, "The mediated construction of crises—Combining automated and qualitative content analysis to investigate the use of crisis labels in headlines of Swiss news media between 1998 and 2020," *Journal of International Crisis and Risk Communication Research*, 7(1), 2024, pp. 83–112.

[46] S. K. An & K. K. Gower, "How do the news media frame crises? A content analysis of crisis news coverage," *Public Relations Review*, 35(2), 2009, pp. 107–112.

[47] K. Lamertz & J. A. Baum, "The legitimacy of organisational downsizing in Canada: An analysis of explanatory media accounts," *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, 15(1), 1998, p. 93.

[48] See C. R. Martin & H. Oshagan, "Disciplining the workforce: The news media frame a General Motors plant closing", *Communication Research*, 24(6), 1997, pp. 669–697; T.; Brimeyer, et al., *op. cit.*

[49] See V. Fielding, "Measuring news media frame building during an Australian industrial dispute," *Australian Journalism Review*, 44(1), 2022, pp. 61–82.

[50] See E. Vaara & J. Tienari, "Justification, legitimization, and naturalization of mergers and acquisitions: A critical discourse analysis of media texts," *Organisation*, 9(2), 2002, pp. 275–304; E. Vaara, J. Tienari & J. Laurila, "Pulp and paper fiction: On the discursive legitimation of global industrial restructuring," *Organisation Studies*, 27(6), 2006, pp. 789–813; See P. Ahonen, "'The world has changed': Discursive struggles over an industrial shutdown in the media, a case from the Finnish pulp and paper industry," *Competition & Change*, 13(3), 2009, pp. 289–304.

[51] See J. Luyckx & M. Janssens, "Ideology and (de)legitimation: The Belgian public debate on corporate restructuring during the Great Recession," *Organisation*, 27(1), 2020, pp. 110–139.

[52] See S. Romenti & C. Valentini, "Alitalia's crisis in the media – a situational analysis," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 15(4), 2010, pp. 380–396.; Nespoli, *Fondata sul lavoro.*

frame shifting occurs over time, revealing the underlying ideologies in (de)legitimising statements and discursive strategies.
Frandsen and Johansen (2016) also discuss the role of the media and "crisis journalism" as collective voices that shape the narrative around corporate crises. Although they do not focus specifically on restructuring or redundancy crises, their analysis of the media's role shares commonalities with that of trade associations (i.e., employers' organisations). As both are intermediaries in crisis communication, Frandsen emphasises the complexity added by the media and trade associations in mediating between the organisation in crisis and its stakeholders. This mediation increases the number of communicative interventions and interpretations, complicating the crisis communication process.

2.2.2 Trade Associations

Frandsen highlights that trade associations can face difficulties when communicating publicly about a crisis. Specifically, they must consider no fewer than three reputational levels: a corporate level, an industry level, and a trade association level[54]. Consequently, employer organisations may sometimes remain silent or avoid public commentary when local or national companies are required to restructure or make redundancies. An exception arises when foreign ownership threatens to relocate plants. In such situations, a united front comprising politicians, trade unions, local authorities, and employer associations is typically formed to defend the interests of the supply chain companies[55]. This aligns with Frandsen's observations, such as in the example from *Børsen* on 17 November 2015, where the media highlighted the role of employer organisations in defending local industries, as was the case with Tesla Denmark and the Danish Electric Vehicle Alliance.

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[53] V. C. Gever, M. O. Ukonu & E. K. Oyeoku, "The media and opposing voices: News frames and slants of Nigeria's restructuring agitations," *African Journalism Studies*, 39(4), 2018, pp. 131–151.
[54] F. Frandsen & W. Johansen, *Organisational crisis*, p.197.
[55] F. Nespoli, "When labour goes populist. How Italian populist leaders frame the labour market and industrial relations on social media," *E-Journal of International and Comparative Labour Studies*, 8(2), 2019, pp. 4–46, ISSN 2280-4056; S. González Begega & H. D. Köhler, "Workforces and local communities against corporate restructuring: A comparative case study of resistance to plant closures in Northern Spain," *Social Movement Studies*, 21(3), 2021, pp. 355–371.

Despite these insights, Frandsen and Johansen give limited attention to the interaction between the media and trade associations, particularly in cases where these associations might exploit crises for strategic purposes. Moreover, these dynamics shift significantly when considering trade unions instead of trade associations.

2.2.3 Trade Unions' Public Relations as a Reputational Threat

In this section, I examine trade unions' public relations in the context of workforce reorganisation, focusing on key activities such as media relations, lobbying, advocacy, and litigation PR.

As I will discuss later, research on trade union public relations has traditionally centred on how unions are portrayed in the media and how such portrayals shape their reputation. Many of these studies reflect concerns from earlier periods, when public opinion in Western countries appeared strongly opposed to unions[56]. Indeed, as is well known, union membership has experienced significant declines across various nations and industries in recent decades, prompting some to characterise the current situation as a persistent crisis for trade unions.

I am not arguing that there is no literature suggesting that trade unions must be proactive in communicating and cultivating relationships with the media. On the contrary, many scholars—such as Paul Manning[57]——have emphasised the importance of enhancing union communication. Moreover, these concepts have been further elaborated in the digital media environment, where attention has increasingly shifted to the role of social media, compared to traditional (legacy) media outlets[58].

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[56] N. Dufty, "Influences on public opinion of unions and industrial relations," *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 23(4), 1981, pp. 417–429; C. R. Martin, *op. cit.*, 2019; C. R. Martin, *op. cit.*, 2004.

[57] P. Manning, *Spinning for labour: Trade unions and the new media environment*, 1998, Routledge.

[58] Among the most significant contributions are the studies by Panagiotopoulos and Barnett (P. Panagiotopoulos & J. Barnett, "Social media in union communications: An international study with UNI global union affiliates," *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 53(3), 2015, pp. 508–532), whose conclusions have been corroborated by more recent work (M. Ford & A. Sinpeng, "Digital activism as a pathway to trade union revitalization," *International Journal of Labour Research*, 11(1–2), 2022, pp. 47–58) showing that digital activism can serve as a pathway to union revitalization. Englert, Woodcock, and Cant ("Digital workerism: Technology, platforms, and the circulation of workers' struggles," *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society*, 18(1), 2020, pp. 132–145) examine "digital workerism" by focusing on technology, platforms, and the circulation of workers' struggles, while

In this paper, however, I wish to highlight the reverse dynamic: how unions can use strategic communication to shape—or even undermine—the reputations of other stakeholders, particularly companies involved in restructuring, and thereby protect their own reputations. Specifically, by framing and attributing responsibility for negative social outcomes, unions can tarnish a company's public image while enhancing their own credibility and influence in restructuring negotiations.

Indeed, if we consider the relationship between trade unions and the media, it becomes even clearer why attention to communication and public relations—beyond mere internal communication—is crucial during a reorganisation involving industrial relations. From this perspective, we should not confine our focus to the fact that organisational restructuring often leads to labour disputes and litigation. In practice, trade union activity rarely consists solely of internal communication or strikes when contesting a reorganisation plan. More frequently, unions adopt broader communication strategies aimed not only at union members or the company's workforce but also at the wider public[59].

I therefore concentrate on public opinion as a broader audience that encompasses various target groups. Trade unions' efforts to spark solidarity are closely tied to the idea of the public interest—not merely from a class-based perspective, but also through specific labour disputes in particular companies. This approach is evident in studies examining the influence of public opinion on labour-management relations, which distinguish between "participants" (those directly affected by the dispute, such as users of disrupted services, laid-off employees, and suppliers) and "outsiders" (those who are not impacted and may form judgments on moral or political grounds rather than economic ones)[60].

Hence, I employ the term "public relations" in a broad sense—not restricted to interactions with media practitioners or traditional outlets. Rather, I focus on the ways in which trade unions mediate their relationship with the broader public.

Carneiro and Costa (B. Carneiro & H. A. Costa, "Digital unionism as a renewal strategy? Social media use by trade union confederations," *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 64(1), 2022, pp. 26–51) discuss "digital unionism" as a form of renewal.

[59] Dufty, *op. cit.*, 1981; Manning, *op. cit.*, 1998.

[60] S. G. Peitchinis, "The influence of public opinion on labour-management relations and dispute settlement," *Relations Industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 32(2), 1977, pp. 268–274.

In mentioning media relations, I do not intend to overlook the challenges of today's high-choice media environment[61], which fragments audiences. In fact, this reality is especially salient within the contemporary mediascape[62], where the digital marketplace—shaped by personal media[63] and an asymmetrical logic of influence—democratises access to information production. This shift has two primary consequences: (1) it expands the range of actors who claim representational capacity by demonstrating communicative power, and (2) it fragments both the public and reference bases. Consequently, modern lobbying and advocacy activities aimed at illustrating the positive or negative impact of a proposed decision focus on presenting decision-makers with a representation of the relevant support or opposition—sometimes targeting public opinion at large[64]. By leveraging public communication, actors demonstrate their capacity to reach—and potentially influence—the same audience segments as their opponents, shaping behaviours related to voting, affiliation, or consumption. These developments in the current media environment further highlight the value of a multivocal approach for interpreting these dynamics, particularly at the micro level.

I also acknowledge the challenges trade unions face due to the disintermediation of legacy media and the networked individualism described by Rainie and Wellman[65], which can hinder their capacity to cultivate broad solidarity. These issues, widely recognised in the literature, warrant ongoing study[66]. However, while past research has focused primarily on how media coverage impacts unions' reputations and the need for unions to employ communication tools, these insights set the stage for a vital complementary perspective: understanding how unions themselves can construct and disseminate public narratives that challenge

[61] M. Prior, "Conditions for political accountability in a high-choice media environment," in K. Kenski & K. H. Jamieson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 897–910.

[62] A. Appadurai, "Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 7(2–3), 1990, pp. 295–310.

[63] M. Lüders, "Conceptualizing personal media," *New Media & Society*, 10(5), 2008, pp. 683–702.

[64] A. Rasmussen, L. Mäder & S. Reher, "With a little help from the people? The role of public opinion in advocacy success," *Comparative Political Studies*, 51, 2018, pp. 139–164.

[65] L. Rainie & B. Wellman, B, *Networked: The new social operating system*, 2012, MIT Press.

[66] Indeed, I have addressed them by examining trade unions' use of TikTok in Italy, Spain and Latin America (F. Nespoli, "Entre identidades profesionales y movilización: Activismo digital en TikTok por los derechos laborales de las mujeres en España y América Latina," in *Los derechos de las mujeres en la sociedad digital*, Dykinson, 2024, pp. 586–607).

corporate actors, particularly in the context of the frequent crises and restructurings that characterise today's economic landscape.
Given this context, and acknowledging from the previous paragraph that a reorganisation plan can escalate into a reputational crisis when an actor explicitly blames the company, it becomes clearer why trade unions often function as "crisis activators"—not least through their communication strategies.

2.2.4 Trade Unions and Framing

In this section, I examine trade unions' public relations in the context of workforce reorganisation, focusing on key activities such as media relations, lobbying, advocacy, and litigation PR.
Frandsen explicitly compares trade associations and trade unions by defining both as meta-organisations with a high degree of formal representation, emphasising their roles as intermediaries in crisis communication[67]. However, trade unions do not receive specific, in-depth treatment within the theory, and their role in crisis communication remains understudied. As Valentini et al. note, "comparatively, little is known about how trade unions, as a specific type of organisation, use framing strategies to achieve their organisational goals"[68].
Although the literature on crisis communication management concerning the role of trade unions is limited, it is now evident that trade unions play a significant role in this context, particularly in how they manage and mitigate the impacts of crises on their members and the broader community. In the context of crises, trade unions often seek media coverage to intensify pressure on companies or governments, employing

[67] According to Frandsen, "a trade association can be described as a meta-organisation with a high degree of formal representation (membership) that has been elected by member organisations and that is on their side. Similarly, a trade union can be defined as an organisation (of individuals) with a high degree of formal representation (membership) that has been elected by the employees" (F. Frandsen & W. Johansen, *Organisational crisis*, p. 194). Though, in another work, Frandsen and Johansen further differentiate Trade associations and trade unions as "The former are interested in the interests of their member organisations [...] while the latter are interested in the interests of the stakeholders (i.e., employees[...]" (F. Frandsen & W. Johansen, "Voices in conflict? The crisis communication of meta-organisations". *Management Communication Quarterly, 32*, p. 96).
[68] Valentini et al., *op. cit.*, p. 4913

strategic tools—such as responsibility-attribution frames—to bolster their negotiating power[69].

We can posit that the starting conditions may fall into two categories. In one scenario, companies may rely on objective conditions that justify declaring a loss of competitiveness. In this case, by announcing restructuring and reorganisation measures, the company is also implicitly acknowledging an organisational crisis, as significant structural changes become necessary. Trade unions might acknowledge the existence of genuine business distress but can advocate for alternative solutions—such as diversification, innovation, or employee development—positioning these as more sustainable and ethically responsible responses. By doing so, they can challenge the narrative of an unavoidable response to an inevitable business downturn by framing the restructuring itself as the root cause of the crisis—a social and occupational one. Thus, they shift the focus from the company's need to enhance competitiveness to the broader social consequences, emphasising the harm inflicted on employees and communities. This, in turn, increases pressure on the company to explore alternative strategies.

This approach is particularly effective when a company is financially unstable, as strikes in such cases can paradoxically provide momentary financial relief by reducing immediate labour costs or, at the very least, failing to significantly disrupt operations—thereby diminishing the strike's impact from an organisational standpoint.

The second scenario corresponds to the situation that Kent seems to refer to, where a company, despite being financially stable overall, undertakes restructuring or reorganisation in order to further improve (or even maximise) its market competitiveness. In such cases, it is even easier for trade unions to highlight the deliberate nature of the restructuring and frame it as an avoidable decision rather than a necessity. In this way, they can turn what the company does not initially perceive as an organisational crisis into one triggered by reputational threats and external pressures.

In summary, as illustrated in Figure 1, whether the restructuring stems from a genuine loss of competitiveness or from a thriving company's pursuit of competitiveness maximisation, trade unions can attribute responsibility to the company. By placing the company's reputation at risk, they can pressure decision-makers to reconsider layoffs or plant closures—particularly if leaders fear that these actions could have long-

[69] A. Krašenkienė, L. Kazokienė & D. Susnienė, "Relationships of the trade unions with the media: The Lithuanian case," *Administrative Sciences*, 4, 2014, pp. 1–14.

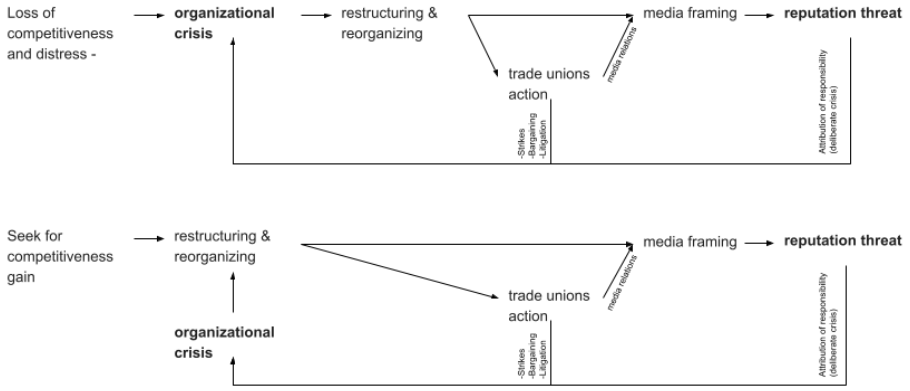
term negative impacts on key financial performance indicators due to shifts in consumer and stakeholder support[70]. And by making these concerns public, trade unions initiate a crisis narrative that forces the company to address reputational risks, compelling them to respond not just to the internal changes but also to the external perception of their actions. The consequent uncertainties surrounding the outcome of a restructuring plan can subsequently transform a reputational crisis into an organisational one, as restructuring operations may be halted or revised. This can increase the costs of restructuring in various ways. For instance, heightened severance benefits, a reduction in the scale of layoffs, or alterations to the terms of redundancies—often direct outcomes of rhetorical battles[71] —can substantially contribute to these expenses[72].

Figure 1. Trade Unions as Reputational Crisis Activators: A Model

[70] Cases like these frequently appear in newspaper coverage. For instance, in 2019, Whirlpool reversed its decision to shut down a production site in Naples, Italy, after just two weeks of worker protests. Initially, Whirlpool had argued that producing high-end washing machines in Naples was no longer profitable, leading to union demonstrations and government dissatisfaction, particularly since the Italian government had invested significant incentives to support local operations. Ultimately, the pressure exerted by unions and the potential withdrawal of these incentives compelled Whirlpool to continue production and avoid layoffs (Piscioneri, F., 2019, October 30. *Whirlpool drops plan to shut plant in southern Italy*. Reuters.com).
A similar scenario arose in 2022–2023 with Wärtsilä, a Finnish multinational planning to close its Trieste (Italy) facility in San Dorligo della Valle, affecting 451 employees. The announcement sparked political debate during an election period, prompted legal action in the Trieste Labour Court, and led to substantial public scrutiny. Italian trade unions have announced a significant protest on 3 September in response to Wärtsilä's decision to terminate all production activities at its Trieste plant. IndustriAll Europe (the European trade union federation representing workers in the metal, chemical, energy, mining, and textile industries) has called on the company to engage in constructive dialogue to establish a viable industrial and employment plan. In response, Wärtsilä replaced its CEO and President for Italy and opted not to appeal the court's ruling, thereby halting the closure plan (Casadei, C., 2022, October 8). *Wärtsilä cambia strategia sulla chiusura di Trieste e apre al dialogo*, ilsole24ore.com).

[71] F. Nespoli, "Il ruolo strategico della comunicazione pubblica e sindacale, tra legge e contrattazione collettiva. Spunti dal caso Wartsila," *Sviluppo e Organizzazione*, 308, 2022, pp. 44–47, Este, Milano.

[72] D. Flanagan & K. O'Shaughnessy, "The effect of layoffs on firm reputation," *Journal of Management*, 31, 2005, pp. 445–463; Y. Hatakeyama, "What Kind of Crisis Communication Messages Benefit Corporate Reputation on High and Minimal Responsibility Case?", in *Advances in Advertising Research XIV: Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger: Advertising and Communication between Immediacy and Sustainability*, Wiesbaden, Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2024, pp. 243–253.



At this point in my reflection, further clarification is required. Indeed, it may seem contradictory that a trade union, whose primary objective is to protect workers, would seek to hinder the functioning of a company or the economy as a whole. This narrative is often employed by anti-union media and corporations when attempting to discredit unions and organised labour, by framing it as a trade-off between protests and the company's survival[73]. However, this may resemble a strawman argument. The actual goal of the union is not to threaten the existence of a company, but rather to influence management's behaviour, pressuring it to be fair and responsible, in accordance with the union's (and, when possible, the public's) expectations. The reputational threat posed by the union is not immediate but is a projection of potential future harm resulting from unethical practices. It is not a form of self-sabotage, but rather a strategic move to condition future actions.

This distinction is necessary, yet ultimately trivial, as it is directly linked to the fundamental objectives of strikes and other union actions, which are not self-destructive. In general, strikes represent not only resistance to oppression but also a strategy of self-emancipation—a declaration of power that underscores workers' central role in wealth production[74]. Unions seek, or should seek, to assert that workers are valuable economic assets, that they deserve fair and equitable treatment, and that labour cost

[73] Nespoli, F. *op. cit.* 2018b.

[74] A. Bogg & C. Estlund, "The right to strike and contestatory citizenship," in *Philosophical Foundations of Labour Law*, 2018.

savings have ethical limits[75]. Communication strategies and reputational threats align with these broader goals[76].

2.2.4.1 The Effect of Layoff Announcements on Business Performance and the Role of Trade Union Advocacy

Advocacy lies at the core of both activism and public relations, both within and beyond organisational structures[77]. This definition is particularly relevant to trade unions. As noted earlier, when applied to trade unions in the context of corporate reorganisation, this principle implies that unions play a pivotal role in drawing public attention to the negative consequences of restructuring. They highlight issues such as job losses, unfair practices, and the erosion of workers' rights.

However, further clarification is necessary regarding the mechanisms through which such pressure prompts companies to reconsider or postpone their plans. The central point here is that influencing public opinion can erode consumer attitudes and shareholder confidence, potentially compromising key financial performance indicators.

One point supporting this assertion is the well-documented link between layoff announcements and financial effects. While this connection is well established in the literature, it is not always discussed specifically in relation to trade union activities, but rather in relation to companies' public relations strategies. The literature suggests that the announcement of layoffs by companies, especially when framed as a necessary response to financial distress, can have long-term detrimental effects[78]. The

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[75] G. Lakoff & E. Wehling, *The Little Blue Book: The Essential Guide to Thinking and Talking Democratic*, Free Press, 2012, pp. 83–85.

[76] Of course, this view is separate from the historical debate about the legitimacy of political strikes versus plant and company-specific strikes (cf. European Parliament, *Towards an EU-wide right to politically strike: A constitutional perspective (PE 757.656)*. Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, 2023).

[77] A. Jelen, K. Demetrious & K. Fitch, "Towards new directions in public relations activism and advocacy research," *Public Relations Inquiry*, 13(2), 2024, pp. 129–135.

[78] Already in 1994 research by De Meuse, Vanderheiden, and Bergmann, challenged conventional wisdom by revealing that, contrary to expectations, financial performance of Fortune 100 companies often worsens rather than improves following announced layoffs. This study tracked companies over a five-year period, including two years before the layoff announcement, the year of the announcement, and two years afterward. The findings suggest that the anticipated benefits of reducing organisational size and cutting costs may not materialize, potentially leading to deteriorated financial performance. Using a slightly different set of companies, always put together by Fortune (Fortune's

repercussions extend beyond the immediate impact on employees, influencing other stakeholders such as customers[79]. Indeed, uncertainty about product quality can arise from layoff announcements, affecting consumer trust and raising concerns among shareholders about the firm's sustainability, often leading to declines in stock prices[80].

I emphasise the potentiality, rather than certainty, of these detrimental effects because the literature on the impact of layoff announcements also highlights that such announcements, particularly those related to revenue refocusing, can result in a positive market reaction and improved financial performance[81]. Therefore, the announcement of a layoff decision could lead to either an increase or a decrease in firm value, depending on whether it is driven by adverse market conditions or efforts to improve efficiency[82]. However, I wish to focus on the role trade unions can play in

America's Most Admired Companies) also Flanagan & Shaughnessy (*op. cit.*) concluded that layoffs have a negative impact on a firm's reputation.

[79] S. Stäbler, A. Himme, A. Edeling & M. Backhaus, "How firm communication affects the impact of layoff announcements on brand strength over time," *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 40(3), 2023, pp. 700–723. This study is particularly important as it underscore the importance of communication activities finding that advertising and social media communications, which may amplify the negative impact of layoffs on brand strength, while effective public relations and communication of CSR initiatives can help mitigate these negative effects.

[80] See S. J. Sucher & S. Gupta, "Layoffs that don't break your company: Better approaches to workforce transition," *Harvard Business Review*, 96(3), 2018, pp. 122–129; V. Landsman & S. Stremersch, "The commercial consequences of collective layoffs: Close the plant, lose the brand?", *Journal of Marketing*, 84(3), 2020, pp. 122–141.

[81] See P. Chen, V. Mehrotra, R. Sivakumar & W. Yu, "Layoffs, shareholders' wealth, and corporate performance," *Journal of Empirical Finance*, 8, 2001, pp. 171–199; P. Chalos & C. Chen, "Employee downsizing strategies: Market reaction and post-announcement financial performance," *Journal of Business Finance & Accounting*, 29, 2002, pp. 847–870; C. Mace, "The market loves a layoff," *Labor: Personnel Economics eJournal*, 2020; K. Eshghi & V. Astvansh, "Stock investors' reaction to layoff announcements: A meta-analysis," *Human Resource Management Journal*, 2023.

[82] See O. Palmon, H. Sun & A. Tang, "Layoff announcements: Stock market impact and financial performance," *Financial Management*, 26, 1997, pp. 54–68. Also various news reports indicates that financial results following downsizing announcements can fluctuate significantly. For instance, on November 28, ArcelorMittal South Africa (ACLJ.J) experienced a nearly 14% drop in share value after announcing plans to close its long steel operations due to weak demand and persistent infrastructure problems, potentially affecting 3,500 workers (Banya, N., 2023, November 28. *ArcelorMittal South Africa shares tumble on plan to close long steel ops*. Reuters.com). In contrast, Unilever's shares rose by 4% on the day it unveiled plans to cut thousands of jobs worldwide and spin off its ice cream division—which includes Ben & Jerry's and Magnum—part of a three-year strategy

both cases, as unions can influence how these announcements are framed in either scenario.

This is particularly relevant when considering that shifts in consumer attitudes towards a company can also be driven by ethical considerations, potentially leading to behavioural responses such as consumer outrage[83]. This phenomenon is particularly likely to result in declining sales when viable alternatives exist within the same industry or sector.

In this context, it becomes evident why trade unions can influence the layoff process by negotiating and advocating for workers, thereby shaping public perceptions, as previously noted. Their involvement affects not only the immediate well-being of employees but also the broader reputation of the company. Moreover, such actions can compel the organisation to engage in public relations and media outreach. While companies are often required to disclose information before restructuring—at least to the financial press[84]—they do not always communicate with the general public, and their representatives typically do not give interviews when announcing a restructuring plan[85]. However, the strategy of remaining silent—advocated by some professionals and scholars[86]—is difficult to uphold when trade unions actively communicate

aimed at spurring growth and improving shareholder returns (Hart, R., 2024, March 19. *Unilever shares up 4% as it plans to cut 7,500 jobs*. Forbes.com).

[83] J. Lindenmeier, C. Schleer & D. Pricl, "Consumer outrage: Emotional reactions to unethical corporate behavior," *Journal of Business Research*, 65(9), 2012, pp. 1364–1373.

[84] See D. Tourish, N. Paulsen, E. Hobman & P. Bordia, "The downsides of downsizing: Communication processes and information needs in the aftermath of a workforce reduction strategy," *Management Communication Quarterly*, 17(4), 2004, pp. 485–516; P. Alles, *Value Creation through Corporate Restructuring: The Influence of Media Coverage*, doctoral dissertation, University of St. Gallen, School of Management, Economics, Law, Social Sciences, and International Affairs, 2020. This is particularly true in cases of cross-border restructuring, as demonstrated in the analysis by Tunheim, de Bruijn, and Walsh (K. Tunheim, M. de Bruijn & J. Walsh, "Reorganisation and restructuring: Selling or closing a business — protecting reputation across national boundaries," in P. Anthonissen (ed.), *Crisis Communication: Practical Public Relations Strategies for Reputation Management and Company Survival*, Kogan Page, 2008, pp. 97–108). Media relations, moreover, play a crucial role, especially in sensitive sectors like financial services, where strategic communication with the media ensures accurate information dissemination and maintains public trust (Y. Slabbert & R. Barker, "An integrated crisis communication framework for strategic crisis communication with the media: A case study on a financial services provider," Communicatio, 37, 2011, pp. 443–465).

[85] J. Kaufmann, I. Kesner & T. Hazen, "The myth of full disclosure: A look at organisational communications during crises," *Business Horizons*, 37, 1994, pp. 29–39.

[86] P. D. Le, H. X. Teo, A. Pang, Y. Li & C.-Q. Goh, "When is silence golden? The use of strategic silence in crisis communication," *Corporate Communications: An International*

during restructuring. At the same time, it remains challenging to adopt a "confession" approach rather than a "no comment" stance, given that confession typically applies to unintentional crises[87]. Consequently, the company's communication in such cases is primarily aimed at countering the union's framing of the organisation as irresponsible.

2.2.4.2 Trade Unions as Political Actors: Visibility and Image

There are additional perspectives that clarify why trade unions might find it logical to threaten a company's reputation. Indeed, the responsibility-attribution frame not only affects the company's public image but also empowers trade unions by legitimising their criticisms and amplifying calls for alternative approaches to competitiveness challenges. This approach challenges the narrative of job cuts as an inevitable necessity and positions unions as proactive, solution-oriented actors—advocating for the long-term well-being of both the company and its employees, rather than merely engaging in defensive tactics[88].

This effect becomes even more pronounced when trade unions succeed in drawing the attention of administrative entities and compelling them to take action, as I will elaborate later. Frandsen's application of Rhetorical Arena Theory (RAT), particularly its focus on the news media as a stage for crisis exploitation, offers a useful framework for understanding the role of trade unions as political actors. Similar to politicians and political parties engaging in "frame contests" during crises to shape public opinion and garner political support, trade unions can be seen as participating in analogous rhetorical battles.

As Boin et al. note, crisis exploitation involves the "purposeful utilisation of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for public office-holders and public policies"[89]. In a similar vein, trade unions

Journal, 24(1), 2019, pp. 162–178; MCB Business Strategy Publications, "Enhancing crisis management through strategic silence: How to achieve desired outcomes," *Strategic Direction*, 35(4), 2019, pp. 28–30).

[87] Cf. L. McDonald, B. Sparks & A. Glendon, "Stakeholder reactions to company crisis communication and causes," *Public Relations Review*, 36, 2010, pp. 263–271.

[88] L. Campagna & L. Pero, "Innovating the management of corporate crises with new forms of participation of trade union representatives and workers," *Studi Organizzativi*, 2022.

[89] A. Boin, P. Hart, E. Stern & B. Sundelius, *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public Leadership Under Pressure*, 2nd ed., Cambridge University Press, 2017, (quoted in F. Frandsen & W. Johansen, *Organisational crisis*, p.189).

can exploit crises by employing rhetorical strategies to amplify their cause through strategic media relations[90].

Moreover, by drawing media attention, trade unions can increase the visibility of their actions and arguments, which can lead to the politicisation of the ongoing disputes. This increased public scrutiny can, in turn, pressure public institutions to intervene, as they become more aware of and responsive to public opinion. In this way, trade unions can elevate their status, legitimising themselves as institutional actors with significant influence in the crisis. Conversely, when political elements are already intertwined with restructuring crises, trade unions can garner substantial support and media attention. This aligns with Frandsen's perspective that crises are not merely threats but also political opportunities. For trade unions, a crisis serves as a platform to showcase their relevance, mobilise their members, and influence policy or corporate decisions.

This is particularly relevant because, as mentioned earlier, the literature has primarily framed trade unions' relationships with the media as problematic, reflecting a period when it was widely perceived that "the tide of public opinion is running strongly against the unions"[91]. This sentiment is echoed in Paul Manning's *Spinning for Labour*, which opens with an introduction titled "Trade Unions and Their Enemies: Front Line Troops", exploring how unions could respond by becoming more sophisticated in their use of media and marketing techniques[92].

Traditionally, this issue has been linked to public perceptions of strikes, a topic extensively explored in the literature. Public opinion often turns against strikers when their actions disrupt daily life, particularly in public service sectors. The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of strikes, frequently framing the discourse in ways that can either support or undermine the strikers' cause[93].

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[90] This relationship is evident in my previous research (ADAPT, *IX Rapporto ADAPT sulla contrattazione collettiva in Italia 2022*, ADAPT University Press, 2022.), which analyzed online news published between 2011 and 2021 using the keywords "crisi" and "azienda". The findings revealed that in 64% of the 338 cases of corporate crises, the news reports mentioned at least one agreement signed between the company and trade unions.

[91] G. Walsh, "Trade unions and the media," *International Labour Review*, 127, 1988, p. 205.

[92] P. Manning, *op. cit.*

[93] See J. Nolan, "Strikes and the public: A consensus?", *New Zealand Journal of Industrial Relations*, 5, 1970; C. De Boer, "The polls: Union and strikes," *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 41(1), 1977, pp. 120–129; C. Christen, P. Kannaovakun & A. Gunther, "Hostile media perceptions: Partisan assessments of press and public during the 1997 United Parcel Service strike," *Political Communication*, 19, 2002, pp. 423–436;

However, it is important to note that trade union actions aimed at countering restructuring plans cannot simply be equated with strikes in general. In cases of companies experiencing financial distress, striking can paradoxically align with the company's interests. For instance, during a strike, companies may save on wages and benefits that would otherwise be paid to striking workers, providing temporary financial relief. However, the dynamics surrounding the role of strikes within reorganisation processes are complex and difficult to generalise, as outcomes are highly context-dependent. Strikes in these scenarios may not provoke consistent results, and their effectiveness is contingent upon the specific circumstances of the restructuring. Effective communication—moving beyond the traditional framing of "unions under pressure" and the singular focus on strikes—can serve as a powerful tool for trade unions to reinforce their relevance, shape restructuring outcomes, and redefine their role in the public eye.

2.2.5 Institutional Actors and Trade Unions: Lobbying and Stakeholder Engagement

Institutional recognition also facilitates stakeholder engagement and lobbying activities. In addition to trade unions and the media, administrative entities play a critical role in corporate crisis management. The importance and nature of these actors vary depending on the national legal and political framework. For instance, in Italy, the government and various institutions have developed a structured approach to addressing organisational difficulties, often referred to as "company crises." In corporate restructuring disputes, regional and local administrations, the Ministry of Economic Development, and labour tribunals play pivotal roles in managing and mitigating the impact on workers. Regional and local administrations, in particular, often act as intermediaries between companies and employees, facilitating negotiations and ensuring compliance with local regulations. However, there is no institutionalised procedure for trade unions to invoke the Ministry of Economic Development at the national level or regional entities at the local level. In such cases, trade unions rely on public communication efforts to pressure these administrative actors into taking action by leveraging public opinion. The underlying dynamics are similar to those that compel companies to respond: reputation is at stake. While companies fear losing customers or

P. Moy, K. McCoy, M. Spratt & M. McCluskey, "Media effects on public opinion about a newspaper strike," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 80, 2003, pp. 391–409.

investors, political parties linked to administrative entities—or the entities themselves—may fear losing the support of citizens and voters if they fail to act in defence of the economy, workers, and local communities threatened by restructuring plans.

If the literature on trade unions has not focused on the role of trade union framing within reorganisation processes, the same is true for lobbying activities, which have largely been examined in general political terms rather than in relation to reorganisation[94]. This emphasis is understandable, as lobbying is typically defined as the practice of exerting pressure on government bodies and administrative entities to influence legislative or policy changes[95]. However, lobbying can also play a crucial role in ensuring that workers' interests are prioritised in crisis management processes, such as by influencing regulations related to reorganisation procedures and collective dismissals[96].

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[94] For instance, Feltrin ("Il fenomeno sindacale nell'Italia contemporanea: Declino 'politico' e ascesa 'di mercato'," *Quaderni di Rassegna Sindacale, Lavori*, 2015) adopted a model from Schmitter and Streeck (*The Organisation of Business Interest: Studying the Associative Action of Business in Advanced Industrial Societies*, WZB Discussion Paper IIM/LMP/81/13, Colonia, 1981.), which identifies lobbying among a range of actions and situates industrial relations within that domain. In the analysis of trade union framing carried out by Valentini et al. (*op. cit.*), lobbying is also related to broader economic and societal concerns.

[95] J. Potters & F. Winden, "Lobbying and asymmetric information," *Public Choice*, 74, 1992, pp. 269–292.

[96] For Instance, in the Wärtsilä case in Italy, significant legal and political actions followed a tribunal ruling in favour of trade unions nearly a year prior. On September 2, 2022, the Friuli Venezia Giulia Regional Administration filed a motion with the Labour Court in Trieste, questioning the constitutionality of the company's relocation procedure. The motion challenged the adequacy of provisions in the 2022 Budget Law, particularly the light penalties imposed on companies engaging in relocation. The law required companies to merely notify unions, regional administrations, and the Ministry of Labour at least 90 days in advance. This legal challenge extended beyond the Wärtsilä case, raising broader implications for future relocation processes under Italian law. In response to union demands, political actors sought to amend the law retroactively. On September 23, 2022, the "Decreto Aiuti-ter" (Decree-Law No. 144/2022) was published in the Gazzetta Ufficiale, introducing significant changes to anti-relocation provisions. The amendments extended the time for social dialogue from 30 to 90 days and applied these changes retroactively to ongoing procedures, such as the one involving Wärtsilä. Additionally, the decree increased financial penalties for companies initiating collective dismissals without union agreements, raising the required contribution from 50% to 500% of the standard amount. In cases of permanent cessation or significant reductions in production (exceeding 40% of the workforce), companies were mandated to repay public subsidies received over the previous 10 years. On the same day, the Labour Court of Trieste issued a ruling (Decree No. 362/2022), condemning Wärtsilä for failing to

2.2.6 Litigation PR

As noted, labour disputes and litigation are among the most prominent trade union activities observed in Europe across national contexts[97]. Courts can be invoked by trade unions to protect workers' rights, challenge unfair practices, or influence the outcomes of restructuring disputes. At the intersection of legal strategy and public communication lies Litigation Public Relations (Litigation PR)—a sophisticated field that has become increasingly critical in today's interconnected media environment. Litigation PR involves the strategic management of communication and media relations by parties involved in legal disputes to shape public perception and mitigate reputational damage.

The importance of Litigation PR grew significantly throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries[98], with two contrasting perspectives: one assigns Litigation PR the primary task of defending the client's reputation, regardless of the outcome of the case[99], while the other argues for a more distinct role for dispute communication, which would primarily aim to influence the court's decision by exerting media pressure on it[100]. These perspectives underscore the necessity of coordination between legal and communication professionals to effectively navigate litigation, including those arising in corporate restructuring[101]. Trade unions may engage in

meet the information obligations outlined in the national collective bargaining agreement (CCNL) and company agreements. The court also ordered Wärtsilä to pay €150,000 in damages to the unions FIM, FIOM, and UILM for reputational harm.

[97] V. Pulignano & P. Stewart, "The management of change: Local union responses to company-level restructuring in France and Ireland – a study between and within countries," *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research*, 18(4), 2012, pp. 411–427; M. Dupuis, "How do local unions strategize against multinational corporations' restructuring threats? Some insights from France," *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 41(1), 2020, pp. 55–72; M. Gillan & R. Lambert, "Industrial restructuring, trade union strategy, and social transformation in Australia and Asia," in M. Gillan & B. Pokrant (eds.), *Trade, Labour and Transformation of Community in Asia*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2009.

[98] D. C. Gibson, "Litigation public relations: Fundamental assumptions," *Public Relations Quarterly*, 43(1), 1998.

[99] K. R. Fitzpatrick, "Public relations and the law: A survey of practitioners". *Public Relations Review, 22*(1), 1996,1-8.

[100] J. Haggerty, *In the court of public opinion: Winning your case with public relations.* J, Wiley, 2003

[101] Cf. D. Silver, "Litigation and the court of public opinion," in *Managing Corporate Communications in the Age of Restructuring, Crisis, and Litigation*, J. Ross Publishing, 2013, pp. 15–27. Historically, landmark cases such as the CBS-General Westmoreland defamation case in the early 1980s demonstrated the power of media strategies in shaping public discourse and influencing legal proceedings. In this case, General Westmoreland's legal

Litigation PR, using media coverage to sway public sentiment and, by extension, judicial decisions in labour disputes.
Litigation PR, also referred to as litigation communication, primarily originates from common law jurisdictions. In these systems, legal principles are developed through judicial decisions, where judges apply statutes, precedents, and practical reasoning to the cases before them[102]. However, in the field of corporate restructuring, Fiat's efforts at the Pomigliano d'Arco plant in Italy underscored the critical importance of PR strategies also in civil law countries[103].

2.3 Summing Up the Reorganisation Rhetorical Arena

Figure 2 illustrates the macro-components of the rhetorical arena in organisational restructuring crises, encompassing all potential actors and their interactions. The arrows represent a simplified depiction of the communicative processes employed by trade unions, the media, and other stakeholders.
While this diagram provides a foundational overview, it does not capture every possible communicative action. For instance, administrative entities may communicate directly with the company, and media messages can have broader implications beyond the immediate actors involved. For example, messages disseminated by the media can influence a bank's willingness to finance a restructuring plan, a potential buyer's interest, or the feasibility of an industrial renewal project. Similarly, such messages can impact the company's competitors, shaping their strategic responses or market positioning. However, while these dynamics may form part of the

team employed extensive PR efforts to combat CBS's portrayal, illustrating the profound impact of media management on the judicial process (see. D. C. Gibson, *op. cit*).

[102] However, various forms of the common law system exist, requiring consideration of both the "legal" and media framework conditions. For instance, from this comparative perspective, Schmitt-Geiger questions whether Litigation PR as practiced in the U.S. can be effectively transferred to the German context (A. Schmitt-Geiger, "Deutschland und die USA: Ist US-amerikanische Litigation-PR auf Deutschland übertragbar?", in *Litigation-PR*, 2012, pp. 57–73.)

[103] It is noteworthy to highlight that the restructuring of the Fiat Pomigliano plant and the subsequent media exposure did not foresee planned layoffs, but rather a plant shutdown in the case that a company agreement assuring plant operation was not signed (F. Nespoli, "Litigation PR e Media Reputation: Una nuova frontiera per le relazioni industriali," *Bollettino ADAPT*, 24 April 2013, available at: www.bollettinoadapt.it.; F. Nespoli, *op. cit*, 2018a).

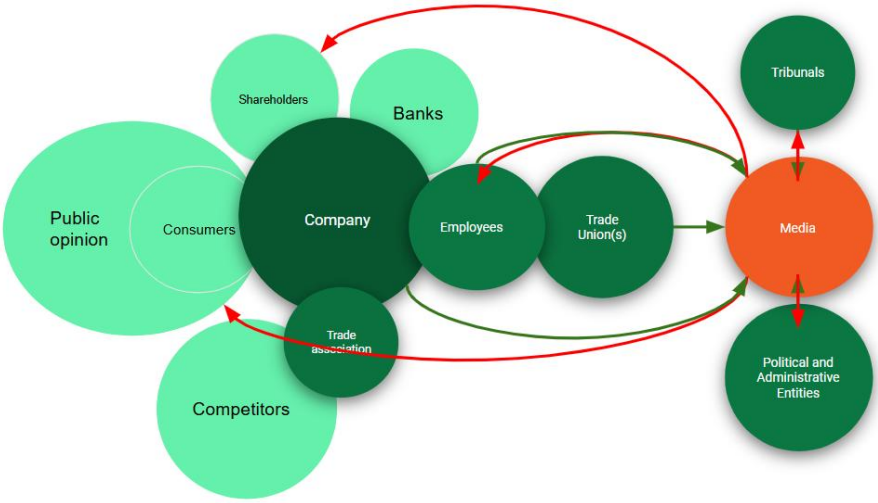
rhetorical arena of reorganisation, they are not central to trade union activity within it.

This paper specifically focuses on external communication strategies and public relations. The green arrows indicate media relations actions originating from the company, trade unions, tribunals, and political entities. These actions are typically executed through press releases and interviews. It is worth noting that employees, particularly during crises such as plant closures, may bypass union intermediation by giving direct interviews, further diversifying the communication landscape.

The red arrows represent media messages and their potential ripple effects on various actors, including public opinion, the company's customers, competitors, investors (shareholders), tribunals, and political entities. These media narratives often shape the broader discourse and influence decision-making processes at multiple levels.

By emphasising these communication flows, the figure highlights the dynamic interplay between media relations and stakeholder engagement during organisational crises.

Figure 2. Rhetoric Arena in Organisational Restructuring Crises: The Macro Component - Patterns of interaction



As explained, within this arena, trade unions can adopt various strategies to garner media attention and shape the narrative surrounding crises, often leveraging their reputational stakes to influence reorganisation outcomes. These strategies are not mutually exclusive and may be employed in combination to maximise impact. Key approaches include:

- Framing: Trade unions aim to frame the crisis in terms that resonate with the public and the media. Unions actively participate in the rhetorical arena by using the media to shape the crisis narrative in a way that aligns with public sentiment and challenges the company's version of events. Their success depends on their ability to make their version of events the dominant narrative within the arena. The use of media is a strategic choice within the rhetorical arena, where unions attempt to shift the narrative in their favour.
- Visibility and institutional recognition: Trade unions seek to position themselves as significant institutional actors by enhancing their public presence. This involves ensuring that their voices are heard and their perspectives are recognised as essential in the broader discourse surrounding crises.
- Stakeholder engagement: Use of media to influence other stakeholders: By gaining media coverage, unions can push public institutions to intervene, leveraging public opinion as a tool to compel political action.
- Litigation PR: In cases where legal disputes arise, unions may engage in public relations efforts to shape the tribunal's perspective. This involves influencing public opinion or media coverage to indirectly impact judicial decisions.
- Lobbying: Through lobbying, unions aim to influence legislation or policy changes that can directly affect crisis management processes, ensuring that workers' interests are prioritised.
- Advocacy: Successful media campaigns by unions can amplify the reputational risks for companies, impacting customer satisfaction, shareholder confidence, and overall market performance. This can lead companies to reconsider their restructuring plans to mitigate public backlash.

Conclusions

This article has sought to position organisational restructuring as a fertile ground for the study of crisis communication, emphasising the pivotal role of trade unions and public affairs in shaping the narrative surrounding such events. By using the term "reorganisation" broadly, this paper has analysed organisational changes affecting employees—such as downsizing, plant closures, offshoring, and layoffs—and how these processes inherently carry reputational risks. Indeed, large-scale reassessments of staffing plans and organisational structures, particularly within major corporations, often attract significant media attention,

transforming otherwise routine corporate decisions into reputational crises.

Drawing on the multivocal approach proposed by Frandsen and Johansen (2016), this paper has illustrated how organisational restructuring can be interpreted as a crisis depending on the perspective of the actors involved. The emergence of a reputational crisis in the context of restructuring largely depends on how the reorganisation is framed and perceived. Theoretically, this can occur regardless of the company's initial conditions or the justification it communicates for the restructuring.

Once this is clarified, the intentional nature of restructuring decisions situates the crises arising from them within Coombs' "intentional cluster" of crises, where responsibility is strongly attributed to the organisation. This categorisation helps in understanding why reputational crises can emerge during restructuring and reorganisation, particularly when trade unions and the media frame these actions as deliberate and avoidable.

Trade unions indeed play a crucial role in this rhetorical arena, shaping public opinion, attributing responsibility to companies, and emphasising the social costs of these actions. From this perspective, competitiveness is pursued at the expense of workers and communities, thus transforming the impact on employees into the crisis itself.

In practice, trade unions can employ a range of strategies, including lobbying, media relations, and litigation PR, to influence restructuring outcomes. By leveraging public opinion, unions can push administrative entities and political actors to take action. While companies may fear losing customers or investors, governments and administrative entities fear losing voter support if they fail to defend local economies and workers.

These actions can pressure companies to reconsider restructuring plans, as reputational risks become intertwined with financial and operational risks. The economic implications of these rhetorical battles are significant. Heightened severance benefits, reduced layoffs, or altered redundancy terms often result directly from these disputes. At the same time, layoffs themselves can have long-term detrimental effects on corporate performance, with impacts on consumer trust, stock prices, and shareholder confidence.

Trade unions not only counter corporate narratives but also propose alternatives—such as diversification, innovation, or employee development—positioning themselves as solution-oriented actors advocating for the long-term well-being of both the company and its employees. In this sense, reorganisation crises can also present an

opportunity for trade unions to reinforce their relevance and demonstrate their constructive role.

These dynamics underline the interconnectedness of reputational, financial, and organisational risks in restructuring crises. Ultimately, this reflection aligns with emerging perspectives indicating that the concept of crisis itself is evolving. Contemporary approaches to crisis communication suggest that crises are no longer viewed as isolated, unpredictable events but rather as inherent and recurring aspects of modern business life.

In conclusion, organisational restructuring represents a distinctive type of crisis that can only be fully understood through a multivocal framework. It is the interplay among various actors—trade unions, media, administrative entities, and companies—that defines the narrative, assigns responsibility, and shapes outcomes. However, this remains largely theoretical and must be complemented by further reflection. Such reflection should enable us to compare the range of possibilities described here, informed by observations of numerous real-life reorganisation cases, with the specific dynamics of individual restructuring crises. Future research should explore and systematise the sociological, economic, political, and legal contextual variables—such as income, education, and occupation of specific target audiences; industrial relations law and culture; industry economic and financial starting conditions; and company reputation legacy. Additionally, the characteristics of the company and its sector are critical in determining the dynamics of restructuring crises. For example, how do public employees and their unions fit into the model I presented in this paper? Public-sector restructuring is often driven by political rather than purely economic motivations, making it a particularly contested space where reputational crises extend beyond labour disputes to issues of governance, public trust, and electoral consequences. Furthermore, the media environment plays a crucial role in shaping the rhetorical arena, as conservative media are often openly hostile to labour movements, making it difficult for trade unions to communicate their narratives through these channels. These and other variables influence the extent to which trade unions can exert power within the rhetorical arena, either amplifying or constraining their impact. Addressing these factors will provide a more comprehensive framework for analysing and understanding the mechanisms underlying reorganisation crises, ensuring a more nuanced understanding of how labour disputes unfold in different cultural, economic, political, and media contexts.

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