

# **How Scansis Functions:**

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## **Lessons from the Houston Astros Sign-Stealing Crisis**



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On January 13, 2020 Major League Baseball (MLB) Commissioner, Robert D. Manfred Jr., released investigation findings confirming that the Houston Astros illegally used a video camera system to electronically steal signs during the 2017 regular season and postseason, in which they won the World Series, and early in the 2018 regular season. The findings exposed what has been referred to as “one of the biggest scandals in Major League Baseball history.”<sup>1</sup> MLB eventually fined the organization \$5 million and the Astros were forced to forfeit their first and second round draft picks in 2020 and 2021. The team’s owner, Jim Crane, also fired the general manager, Jeff Luhnow, and manager, A. J. Hinch.

In this paper we analyze Major League Baseball’s Houston Astros organizational rhetoric and crisis response efforts after the organization was found guilty of cheating. Analysis spans from the beginning of the crisis on November 12, 2019 through March 12, 2020 and items analyzed include two Houston Astro press conferences and news stories published across 20 media outlets. By viewing the crisis as a “scansis,” a unique type of crisis and scandal characterized by moral outrage, the authors hope to further the field’s understanding of this newly introduced term, investigate how crisis communication impacts stakeholders after a scansis, and identify practical steps crisis communication practitioners can take in scansis situations.<sup>2</sup> While previous research on scansis utilized survey research to produce quantitative findings, our analysis offers qualitative research as a way to understand stakeholder reactions that can ultimately be compared with Coombs and Tachkova’s findings, as their work is the first known published research on scansis.<sup>3</sup> It is our hope that this type of layered approach to understanding scansis, by comparing our qualitative findings to prior quantitative research, can further validate the initial findings of Coombs and Tachkova, provide a deeper level of knowledge on scansis, and benefit practitioners by helping them know how to respond when an event blurs definitional lines.



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## BACKGROUND

The MLB investigation into the Astros organization resulted from a November 12, 2019 article published on *The Athletic* that included testimony from former Houston Astros pitcher Mike Fiers.<sup>4</sup> This was Fiers’ first acknowledgment to reporters that some, but not all, of the players with the Astros were utilizing electronic sign stealing in 2017, with three other unnamed sources also mentioned in the piece. This prompted an MLB investigation that eventually proved a cheating scheme had existed over two seasons.

The team’s electronic sign stealing involved a camera in center field to video the catcher’s signals and relay them in real time to someone who could quickly interpret what pitch was coming and immediately alert the batter. Since the 2014 season, MLB managers had the opportunity during each game to dispute one call with a video replay system. The Astros’ video replay room, however, illegally accessed this feed from the center field replay cameras throughout home games to electronically steal signs.<sup>5</sup> At the beginning of 2017, someone would decipher the pitch, run from the replay room to the dugout with the information, and the dugout would transfer that quickly to the batter. Eventually, the bench manager, Alex Cora, started calling the video replay room to get

<b>Table 1. Timeline of Houston Astros sign-stealing crisis events</b>	
Nov. 12 '19	<i>The Athletic</i> released a story stating the Houston Astros electronically stole signs during the 2017 season and part of the 2018 season.
Nov. 12 '19	General manager Jeff Luhnow told media the club was looking into allegations in conjunctions with the MLB.
Nov. 12 '19	Astros organization released a statement referencing <i>The Athletic</i> story, saying they were cooperating with MLB and that they had no further comment.
Nov. 19 '19	MLB Commissioner Manfred addressed the scandal and said the investigation was thorough and ongoing.
Jan. 13 '20	Manfred and MLB released their official statement and disciplinary actions regarding the Astros sign-stealing.
Jan. 13 '20	Houston owner Jim Crane held a press conference, fired GM and manager, and promised this won't happen again.
Jan. 16 '20	Josh Reddick was the first Astros player to address the media and didn't apologize.
Jan. 18 '20	Jose Altuve & Alex Bregman, 2 other players on 2017 team, addressed the media. They accepted MLB's actions but did not apologize.
Jan. 21 '20	Crane informally addressed media. Promised an apology when the team gets back together at spring training in February.
Jan. 29 '20	Dusty Baker was hired as manager and Jim Click was hired as general manager.
Feb. 13 '20	Media day at spring training. Crane, Baker, Bregman, and Altuve spoke at a press conference. All apologize, but many media outlets reported a lack of remorse by players and management. All players were made available to the media in clubhouse for additional informal interviews.
Mar. 12 '20	Spring training games, which began on Feb. 23 for the Astros, were cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the season for all MLB teams was indefinitely postponed.

the signs, or the signs would be texted either to a smart watch or a smart phone of someone in Houston's dugout. After not getting caught, the strategy developed. Cora then had the center field camera feed go straight to a television monitor just outside the Astros dugout, and players would watch the monitor and bang on a garbage can twice if it was going to be a change up or a curveball, or not at all if a fast ball was coming.<sup>6</sup> Knowing what pitch is coming gives the batter a crucial advantage and the opposing pitcher a significant disadvantage. The resulting advantage allowed the Astros to win the most significant title in the league, the World Series. While the crisis lasted for months (see Table 1), the MLB investigation culminated on January 13, 2020 with the Astros being fined \$5 million, losing their 2020 and 2021 first and second round draft picks, and suspending their general manager and manager for the 2020 season.

For more click here

[\*Sign Stealing: Explained\*](#)

Reactions outside the Astros' organization were unfavorable when MLB handed down these punishments. Fans, players, and owners were unhappy with how "easy" the Astros got off as the Astros were allowed to keep their 2017 title and initially showed no remorse for their actions. After MLB's investigation into Houston concluded, one anonymous baseball executive told the *Washington Post* that for years he and 10-12 other team executives had complained to MLB that the Astros were engaged in something nefarious.<sup>7</sup> Another unnamed executive noted, "The whole industry knows they've been cheating [...] for three or four years. Everybody knew it."<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, when *The Athletic* story was published, more negative attention of the organization's past transgressions clouded public perception. Assistant general manager Brandon Taubman lost his job during the 2019 season for directing inappropriate comments at female reporters in the clubhouse. One of the female reporters was accused by the Astros organization of trying to "fabricate a story," but the team later retracted their statement after Taubman was fired. These negative headlines throughout 2019 were in addition to the Astros having to defend themselves against cheating allegations. A history of crisis within an organization is known as the velcro effect, which is the tendency of previous crises to "attach to" and frame new organizational crises, making it more difficult for them to recover good will due to the compounding negative crises.<sup>9</sup> A negative reputation for the Astros organization was building even before fans and the public knew the extent of the team's electronic sign stealing.

The manner in which the team cheated, and its developing complexity as those involved weren't caught, suggested a disregard for ethics and embraced a win-at-all-cost mentality that contradicts the myth and norms that sport is an even playing field where hard work and effort are what sets winners and losers apart. Athletes are perceived to demonstrate moral purity and religious piety, and cheating on such a large scale challenged these myths and questioned the contractual underpinning that many fans put their faith in – that sports contests are fought as fairly as possible.<sup>10</sup>



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When fans attend sporting events, the expectation is to see a fair contest devoid of cheating. This assumption between players and fans can create significant problems when immoral activities occur, values differ, and rewards are not appropriately awarded to those teams or individuals who abide by the sacrosanct protocols and rituals enmeshed in sports. As the Houston Astros electronically stole signs throughout two seasons and won a World Series as a consequence of their cheating, fans, media and other players who respect the rules of the game were morally outraged.

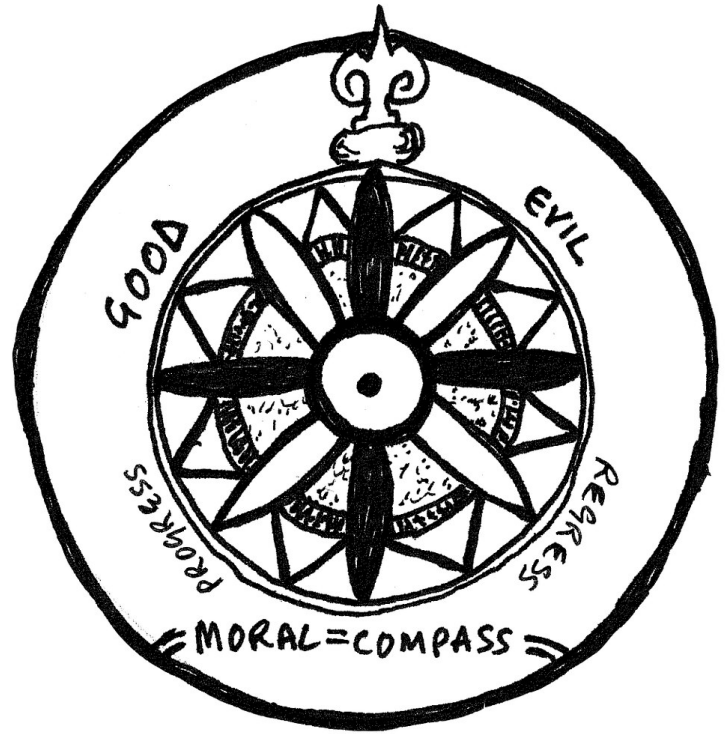
Moral outrage is the perceived violation of a moral principle or standard that results in anger.<sup>11</sup> The sports world rests on perceived moral principles that anchor a viewers' experience. The principal rules of sport are considered protected values:

A protected value is one for which we will not accept tradeoffs. We react to violations of these values with outrage. We may allow some rules of sports to be bent (players in professional basketball often take more than one step after they stop dribbling), but we do not dispense with the rules altogether. And a team or player that flouts those rules bears the brunt of the outrage of fans, management, and even the officials of the league governing the sport."<sup>12</sup>

In the case of the Astros, the perception of moral outrage spanned the league from journalists, to fans, to players. For example, while talking to the media during spring training, Washington Nationals pitcher Max

Scherzer said of the Astros, “They crossed the moral line and cheated,” referencing that cheating is considered a breach of not only the rules, but the moral code within sports.<sup>13</sup> Representative Bobby L. Rush, (D-Ill) referred to this violation as a “cancer” and asked that a congressional oversight hearing take place to ascertain the degree to which it has permeated baseball.<sup>14</sup> ESPN journalist Jeff Passan reported that one team owner referred to owner Jim Crane by saying: “Did you notice,” [...] “he never said ‘Sorry?’”<sup>15</sup> A former producer for ESPN’s Baseball Tonight, Chris Bodig, wrote “[...] those players are about to go through a gauntlet of name-calling, boos, and taunts from opposing fans on a daily basis.”<sup>16</sup>

It is valuable to remember, however, that not all crises destroy an individual or an organization as a crisis can provide “turning points in organizational life.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the potential to create a positive result from a crisis can always exist, but it is up to organizational representatives at all levels to ensure that appropriate, timely, and effective response strategies are utilized. In the case of the Astros, however, as the integrity of the game was questioned, the moral outrage built, especially when appropriate corrective actions and crisis strategies were not taken to placate government leaders and fans. One Astros fan noted: “Honestly, I’d probably feel better about the organization, the players, and the chances of regaining respect in the league if the organization at least offered to vacate the title.”<sup>18</sup>



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## SCANSIS

Close analysis of what organizational members did, and how fans reacted, demonstrate that the Astros moved beyond traditional notions of crisis into a new and largely overlooked type of crisis and scandal that involves



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moral judgement. A crisis is “an event that is an unpredictable, major threat that can have a negative effect on the organization, industry, or stakeholders if handled improperly.”<sup>19</sup> A scandal is characterized by “media coverage, a need for punishment and moral outrage.”<sup>20</sup> Scant research has focused on events containing elements of both a crisis and a scandal, but two such studies by Coombs and Tachkova identify this type of a crisis communications event as a scansis.<sup>21</sup> This term moves scholarly discussions past traditional understandings of crisis and scandal to account for unique situations that mix a crisis with perceived immorality, injustice, and greed.<sup>22</sup> For example, when the manufacturing company Mylan significantly raised the cost of EpiPen (a lifesaving injector pen that millions of people rely on during

an allergic reaction), many viewed it as a greedy and unjust move due to its focus on increasing profits at the risk of human life. It was both a crisis, as it negatively impacted the pharmaceutical company's reputation, and it was a scandal due to the moral outrage of charging too much for a lifesaving medication and the public's need for punishment. Blurring the lines of crisis and scandal produces a more complex type of crisis and understanding these types of situations can help communication practitioners when they face such a challenge.

Coombs and Tachkova designed two empirical studies related to the Mylan EpiPen controversy to test how certain crisis response strategies worked in a scansis, with the assumption that corrective action with moral recognition would work better. Findings showed that neither traditional crisis responses nor corrective action with moral recognition had any short-term effect in a scansis situation. However, they did find that "corrective action with moral recognition, was perceived as the most empathetic response and created the lowest levels of moral outrage" over time.<sup>23</sup> Corrective action coupled with moral recognition, therefore, presents an empathetic organizational response that could have a long-term positive effect, thereby improving the chances of stakeholder forgiveness and reducing the chance of organizational stigma.

In order to further understand scansis and how stakeholders react in scansis situations, this study utilizes a similar methodology as Coombs and Tachkova by analyzing a specific case study through four crisis response strategies: no response, corrective action, justification, and corrective action and moral recognition. While Coombs and Tachkova identified which of these responses had the most optimal long-term effect in a scansis, we seek to identify how the Astros utilized similar response strategies to see how they were perceived by stakeholders. Analysis, therefore, is conducted by analyzing organization, player, and fan responses with a specific focus on the four crisis response conditions. For consistency, these terms are defined in the same way that Coombs and Tachkova defined them. No response is defined as an organization releasing additional information about the company that didn't relate to the issue. Corrective action "is a form of adjusting information that attempts to repair the damage created by the crisis and to prevent a repeat of the crisis."<sup>24</sup> Justification occurs when an action is perceived as necessary. For example, in the case of the Mylan EpiPen price increase, Mylan released statements explaining why the price increase was necessary. Finally, corrective action and moral recognition occur when the organization acknowledges "the moral violation and explain[s] what is being done to prevent future violations of moral codes."<sup>25</sup>



## HOUSTON ASTRO'S CRISIS RESPONSE

Although the crisis became an extended crisis, spanning over several months, this analysis is limited in its focus to events that took place beginning November 12, 2019 and ending March 12, 2020. The main events and the artifacts surrounding the Astros during these first four months of the crisis are taken from several Internet sources relating to the events listed in Table 1. Furthermore, November 12, 2019 corresponds to the date the story was first reported and March 12, 2020 is the last day spring training games were played due to the COVID-19 outbreak in the United States. LexisNexis was the primary database used and the artifacts analyzed include two press conferences hosted by the Houston Astros organization and stories published across 20 different media outlets.<sup>26</sup> Analysis of these media outlets is due to their national popularity, sports-centric nature, or baseball-invested-public focus.

## No Response

No response was defined as an organization releasing additional information about the company that didn't relate to the issue. The initial organizational response came on November 12, 2019, from Astros general manager Jeff Luhnow and was the same day that Rosenthal and Drellich's story was published by *The Athletic* (2019), suggesting that the club made a quick response to the allegations.<sup>27</sup> Luhnow said that he couldn't comment on the sign-stealing revelation because the club was "going to look into the allegations in cooperation with Major League Baseball."<sup>28</sup> While Luhnow



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suggested a transparent and authentic investigation, he also said: "I'm not going to get into exactly what I knew or anybody knew at this point. [...] I'm just going to have to wait and see. But I'm sure there will be an appropriate time to answer that question directly."<sup>29</sup>

The same day, the Astros released the following statement to the media: "Regarding the story posted by *The Athletic* earlier today, the Houston Astros organization has begun an investigation in cooperation with Major League Baseball. It would not be appropriate to comment further on this matter at this time."<sup>30</sup> Manager A. J. Hinch also declined to comment except to say he was cooperating with the investigation. While there seemed to be an effort from the Astros organization to respond in a timely manner, the messaging largely included messages that did not address the allegations, but instead communicated that the organization was going to wait until Spring Training to deliver a statement or address the crisis.

Following these statements on November 12, 2019 when the allegations were made, and January 12, 2020, the day before the league's commissioner and the MLB Department of Investigations (DOI)



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released their official statement and disciplinary actions, nothing was mentioned on either the Houston Astros Twitter account or Facebook page. No official releases were posted on their official MLB website ([mlb.com/astros](http://mlb.com/astros)) either. Current Astro players kept quiet, except a few former members of the club who spoke and claimed to know nothing about the sign stealing. During the first two months of this crisis, the Astros front office, management, current and former players deferred to the legality of the case under investigation and maintained their silence. Meanwhile, 181 stories were found during this same time period in a Nexis Uni search, suggesting that while the Astros were silent, media outlets filled that silence with news and opinions, allowing it to maintain an extended life cycle before the public eye.

## Corrective Action

Corrective action “is a form of adjusting information that attempts to repair the damage created by the crisis and to prevent a repeat of the crisis.”<sup>31</sup> The organization’s silence was broken on January 13, 2020 after MLB released its final investigative report. A few hours after the report was made public, Astros owner Jim Crane held a mid-afternoon press conference, which was shown live on the Astros Twitter account, Facebook page, and their official MLB website. At the press conference, Crane read from a prepared statement and then took questions from the media. In his statement, he accepted the findings of MLB’s investigation but stated that he would do more corrective action than what MLB did in their sanctions and fire two managers, A.J. Hinch and Jeff Luhnow.<sup>32</sup> He ended by emphasizing that the team needed a clean slate and that the organization would always do the right thing. In January, Crane notably went outside of the clubhouse to hire Dusty Baker as a new manager, and in February, brought in a new GM from the Tampa Bay Rays instead of hiring internally.

An additional time the Astros officially responded to the crisis was at a press conference on the first day of media availability during spring training on February 13, 2020. Jim Crane and new manager Dusty Baker read prepared statements. In between their comments, third baseman Alex Bregman and second baseman Jose Altuve also read brief prepared statements. Crane’s statement started by saying he wanted to “apologize again” to the fans and the city of Houston for what had happened, although this was technically his first public apology.<sup>33</sup> He also mentioned how sorry the team was but didn’t discuss his own remorse. Through these statements, Astros personnel hoped to correct their actions by attempting to “repair the damage created by the crisis.”<sup>34</sup>



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[Spring Training  
Press Conference](#)

## Justification

Justification occurs when an action is perceived as necessary. While Astros personnel never explicitly communicated that cheating was necessary, there were several statements that suggested moving on from the sign stealing scandal was necessary. Towards the

end of spring training, Houston Astros management, players, and the owner were clear on several key messages that they began to use consistently: they were done making amends for 2017, were determined to prove themselves in 2020, none of the players felt that their actions influenced the results of the 2017 postseason, and they maintained that their Worlds Series title should not be relinquished.<sup>35</sup> For example, pitcher Lance McCullers Jr. downplayed the impact, specifically in how it related to the World Series, by noting that “during the postseason, you have guys going into the sixth, seventh inning throwing perfect games against us. It wasn’t something that was impactful during those times, and I truly believe that.”<sup>36</sup> Owner Jim Crane claimed at



“Houston Astros bullpen @ Minute Maid Park” by D.L. is licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0

the spring training news conference, “Our opinion is this didn’t impact the game. We had a good team. We won the World Series, we’ll leave it there.”<sup>37</sup> But in a follow-up question to Crane, he denied that he had said that the cheating had not impacted they game but admitted they were able to play in the World Series because his team “broke the rules.”<sup>38</sup> Houston outfielder Josh Reddick commented “At some point, you have to move on. We’re going to go out there and win and shut everybody up.”<sup>39</sup> When asked if the Astros should apologize to the Yankees or Dodgers (teams that were defeated in the Astros’s World Series run), Reddick added “We don’t feel the need to have to reach out to those guys, or anybody for that matter. It is what it is.”<sup>40</sup>

## ***Corrective Action and Moral Recognition***

Corrective action and moral recognition occur when the organization acknowledges “the moral violation and explain[s] what is being done to prevent future violations of moral codes.”<sup>41</sup> After the formal press conference on February 13, 2020, the media were allowed inside the locker room to talk to all the players. Pitcher Justin Verlander expressed regret over not saying something in 2017 when he saw what was taking place: “I wish I had said more. Looking back, I can’t go back, reverse my decision. I wish I said more, and I didn’t and for that I’m sorry.”<sup>42</sup> Other players, including shortstop Carlos Correa, right fielder George Springer, first baseman Yuli Gurriel, and pitcher Lance McCullers, Jr., made comments similar to Verlander’s by apologizing for their actions, saying how sorry and remorseful they felt, and regretting that they hadn’t taken the initiative to stop what was happening. Ultimately, while there were statements that recognized moral failures, Astros personnel never actually merged these statements with corrective action steps to accomplish this specific crisis response that Coombs and Tachkova identify as a key way to overcome a scansis situation.



Justin Verlander by D. Benjamin Miller, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

## ***Additional Crisis Responses***



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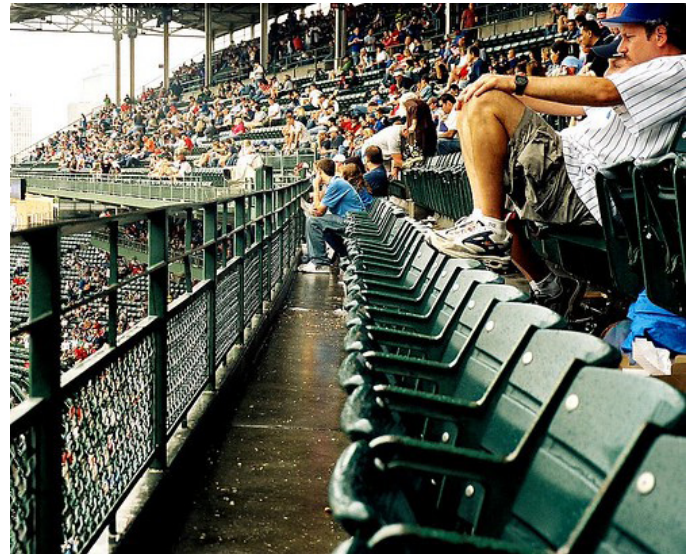
In order to provide as holistic of an overview of the Astros response as possible, it’s important to recognize that the organization did use strategies in addition to the four listed above. Astros personnel heavily relied on postponing messages that identified that an appropriate response and apology would come at a later date. Even though the investigation results came out in November 2019, Astros personnel stated on several occasions that they would wait for Spring Training in February to address the situation. One illustrative example of this occurred on January 16, 2020 when outfielder Josh Reddick was the first to face the media as part of the Astros Caravan, the annual fan outreach tour and commented: “It just stinks. It stinks for everybody involved,” adding “I just think it will get addressed when the time is right,” Reddick said. “When everyone feels the time is right, it will get taken care of.”<sup>43</sup>

An additional crisis response strategy utilized included third-party image repair. This type of image repair occurs when the peers of an accused person have a “good deal of prestige” and can “help to shape and change attitudes.”<sup>44</sup> A neutral third party who is admired and respected by the publics affected can bring balance and perspective to a crisis. Third party image repair was used by the newly hired manager, Dusty Baker, during the second press conference. Baker is a neutral third party because, while he was employed by the Astros, he was not part of the 2017 or 2018 teams. During the press conference at Spring Training in February, he read a short statement and asked people to forgive the players for the mistakes they had made.

## FAN AND PUBLIC REACTIONS

While Astros personnel utilized several response strategies, they appeared to do little to repair the team’s image. Even though remorse was expressed in the press conferences, local and national headlines regarding the organization’s statements included titles such as “‘Embarrassing,’ ‘Tone deaf’: Reactions to Astros’ apologies for cheating scandal;” “Reaction to Houston Astros news conference a mix of scorn and skepticism;” “MLB players react to Astros’ apology for stealing signs: ‘They didn’t own up to anything;” and “The Astros apology press conference was a total disaster.”<sup>45</sup> ESPN conducted an online poll and found that 56% of avid MLB fans believed the Astros should relinquish their 2017 championship. Additionally, “[a]mong avid MLB fans, 86% view[ed] the situation as serious, with 57% saying it’s very serious, compared to 83% of the game’s overall fans considering it serious, including 52% who say it’s a very serious situation.” And 58% of adults felt that the Astros players should have been punished for their involvement as well as management.<sup>46</sup>

Overall fan and public reactions to Houston’s crisis response were negative. After it was confirmed that firing Hinch and Lunow was the only corrective action that would be self-administered by the Astros organization, talk of retaliation by players and fans emerged. Two days after their spring training press conference, manager Dusty Baker urged MLB to punish pitchers for throwing “beanballs” (intentionally throwing pitches at players while they’re batting) after reports surfaced from players around the league that they would use that as a form of redress. For example, Ross Stripling, a pitcher for the LA Dodgers, told reporters: “I would lean toward yes. In the right time and the right place” when asked if he would consider throwing at Houston batters.<sup>47</sup> Astros player Carlos Correa told reporter Ken Rosenthal in a televised interview that he and other players had received death threats.<sup>48</sup> Dave Sheinin, a sports writer with the *Washington Post* described spring training for the Houston Astros: “All spring, the Astros were greeted with boos, invective, crude signs and trash-can banging - not to mention high-and-tight fastballs - as fans and opposing pitchers alike took it upon themselves to dole out the justice that MLB itself chose against.”<sup>49</sup>



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For more click here

[\*Player Reactions to Astros\*](#)

Reactions of this nature reveal that external stakeholders remained unappeased with the apologies, corrective action, and remorse strategies employed by Astros personnel. Two long-time Houston fans shared a letter with Craig Calcaterra of NBCSports.com that they had also sent to the Astros front office. The letter stated

that they had thrown away all of their Astros merchandise and memorabilia from the 2017 season and that they would not be watching any games on TV or buying tickets to the games, as they had done for a decade, “for the foreseeable future.”<sup>50</sup> They never received a reply to the letter. While disgruntled fans are commonplace in sports, the Astros also faced three lawsuits filed against them in a Texas state court by current and former tickets holders who allege they were defrauded because the games were deceptive in nature and because the success the team enjoyed, which was a consequence of the sign stealing, resulted in ticket price increases.<sup>51</sup>



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The heavy focus on the organization, and the negative public reaction throughout spring training, came to a four-month pause with the 2020 mid-March shutdown of spring training due to COVID-19. On July 23, 2020, Major League Baseball eventually resumed to empty stadiums, void of fans and virtually no media. This meant a shortened season for all 32 teams with an amended schedule and strict rules for social distancing during the pandemic. But these rules didn’t keep the Dodgers and the Astros from clearing the benches and the bullpens in their first meeting at Houston’s Minute Maid Park just five days into the season. Pitcher Joe Kelly, a vocal opponent of the Astros who played for the Boston Red Sox team who was defeated by Houston in the 2017 Division Series, threw two wild pitches at Bregman and

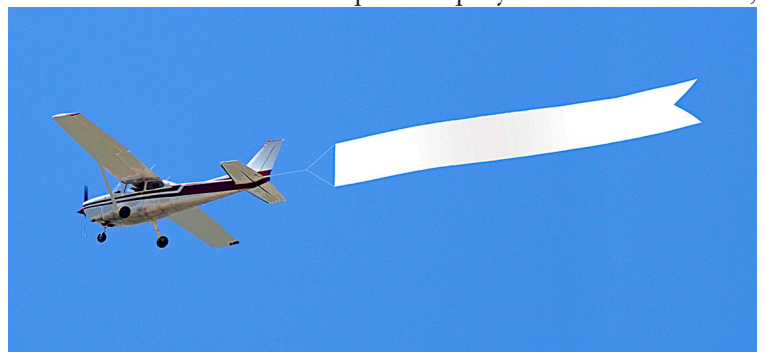
Correa. Words and a mocking facial expression were exchanged between Kelly and Correa, and players quickly were on the field, keeping their distance, but still having plenty to say to each other.<sup>52</sup> There were other bench-clearing incidents in 2020 for Houston, and players across the league voiced their opinions about the cheating that occurred.

For more click here

[\*Astros Players Hit by Beanballs\*](#)

Additionally, the inability to attend games did not stop baseball fans from finding creative ways to antagonize the Astros throughout the 2020 season. An “ongoing, underground campaign” evolved from a Twitter account created in February called *2020 Astros Shame Tour*.<sup>53</sup> The use of “shame” in the tour’s name suggests that guilt and immorality were at the core of how the cheating was perceived, and through this platform, 300,000 fans have had the chance to reflect on and rejoice in Houston’s struggles on the field during the season. Inspired by a single fan booing the Astros outside of Anaheim’s stadium, an Oakland A’s fan, Jon Wilson, raised enough money to have an airplane fly a banner over the stadium in Oakland when the Astros were in town that read “Houston Asterisks.”

The extent of the player and fan reactions, even after several months of suspended play due to COVID-19, suggests the level of anger and moral outrage that existed among Houston’s publics and demonstrates the organization’s inability to make amends and effectively address the moral component of the scansis.



Mehmet Hilmi Barcin

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Houston Astros events from 2017-2020 provide a case study to learn from due to the national attention that the Astros received, the obvious underlying moral component of cheating, and the clear fan reaction that pinpointed shame as something the organization should “feel” and recognize. The “perception of injustice coupled with greed” and to the limited application of corrective action, as the Astros were allowed to keep their 2017 World Series title and no players were punished in any way, advanced this crisis to a scansis.<sup>54</sup> This situation provides not only a powerful example of a developing crisis communication term, but suggests what the potential consequences are when an organization neglects or holds back in showing obligatory moral acknowledgement of their misdeeds to their publics. Withholding can further enrage those same publics by a continued lack of ethics in their limited use of corrective action.

It’s clear that the Astros did devote time and personnel to attempt to rectify the fallout from the scansis. They provided quotes to journalists, identified times they’d be available to address the situation, set up press conferences, and used messaging to try to apologize and show remorse. However, their efforts fell flat and had a limited impact. Ultimately, these qualitative findings demonstrate an unsuccessful response by the Astros organization and provide support that aligns with Coombs and Tachkova’s findings that corrective action, justification, and no response are ineffective and inadequate in a scansis situation.

The Astros’ response to this scansis was inadequate for several reasons. First, the team’s corrective action step of firing two managers was not perceived as enough. The use of corrective action can be advantageous in normal crisis situations, but because Houston’s actions were perceived as so immoral, and cheating helped them win one of the most prestigious titles in sports, the use of this corrective action and other crisis response strategies had minimal positive effect on external publics. This emphasizes Coombs and Tachkova’s findings that in a scansis, corrective action and moral recognition have the most long-term effect and is “perceived as



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the most empathetic response and create[s] the lowest levels of moral outrage.”<sup>55</sup> It was essential that the Astros implemented more moral recognition into their corrective action steps, but this was executed poorly. Second, their justification that it was necessary the organization moved on from focusing on the sign stealing was perceived as inappropriate. Players repeatedly noted that it was time to move on and that their actions didn’t impact the game – even though they clearly did. Third, the team’s delayed and non-response allowed media and fan reactions to fill the void. Organizational personnel let weeks go by before delivering formal statements and apologies and the resulting trickle of a response coming from the organization swayed from no response to a poor response.



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After waiting so long, Houston’s publics needed more moral recognition from the owner and players to be convinced of their remorse if they wanted any chance of avoiding long-term organizational stigma. Specific crisis strategies are necessary when there is a moral outrage component and “recognizing and acknowledging the moral violation that the individuals in the organization has committed following a scansis is an important aspect of a crisis response.”<sup>56</sup> Since the morality component of the cheating scandal was never addressed by team representatives, either at the management or the player level, the scansis continued to linger and never seemed to be resolved among its stakeholders. Even when apologies have the disadvantage of not

happening in a timely manner, the crisis can still be remedied by going above and beyond the normal means to ensure that the apology is especially thoughtful and significant.<sup>57</sup> The Astros repeatedly missed this opportunity. Coombs and Tachkova's initial scansis research says that customary crisis responses at this level won't have a positive short-term effect for the Houston organization, but if nothing is done, long-term defamation of the team is probable. This long-term defamation appears to be what the Astros are experiencing as fans have gone to great lengths, devoting time, energy, and resources, to emphasize the team's moral failings months after the investigation found them guilty.

So what can communication practitioners do in scansis situations?

First, moral recognition and corrective action should be done quickly and by as many members of the organization as possible. While stakeholders might not forgive the organizational members immediately, as Coombs and Tachkova found, there is a chance that in the long-term, there can be a reduction of organizational stigma. The Astros refused to acknowledge the moral underpinnings of their actions both in the short-term and in the long-term. For the few players who stated that they regretted what happened, those players had no opportunity to provide corrective action along with their moral recognition, as that power lied in the hands of the owner and MLB. Other traditional organizations that have multiple layers of power (from managers, to vice-presidents, to CEOs) might be able to benefit from corrective action and moral recognition occurring throughout the organization. That way more areas of the organization could help implement a signal message of moral wrongdoing, while also implementing corrective action through all levels of the organization.



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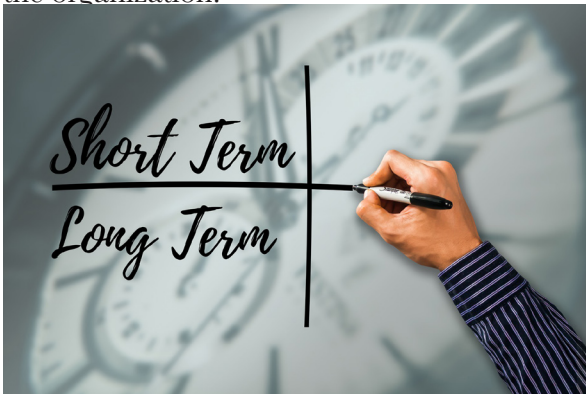


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Second, upon discovering they are in a scansis situation, organizations can benefit from this research by heeding Coombs and Tachkova's advice that moral recognition and corrective action may not work immediately, but can mend reputations over time.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, recognizing the difference between short-term and long-term success is imperative. For the Astros, it remains to be seen how they recover as years go by, but these authors suggest it is never too late to implement moral recognition and corrective action.

Finally, the organization must "right the wrong." The authors of this work suggest that not any corrective action or moral recognition will suffice in recovering from a scansis. The Houston Astros were told they did not have to forfeit their 2017 World Series title; therefore, this malfeasance wasn't remedied, because the appropriate corrective action had not taken place. Therefore, we posit that the trophy and the World Series title needed to be returned and they should have vacated all of their wins. Numerous comments from fans and the media showed outrage that MLB did not hand down tougher sanctions and reactions focused significantly on identifying the cheating as "not fair." The Astros had violated the rules, and ultimately anything gained through cheating should be corrected. The firings never would have been sufficient as it did not "right the wrong."

While it remains to be seen what will occur with stakeholders' moral outrage and the resulting organizational stigma towards the Houston Astros, this case study, combined with Coombs and Tachkova's findings, can help organizations in future scansis situations. Additional qualitative and quantitative research are needed, however, to further explicate how scansis episodes function and how stakeholders react in the short and long term.



Image by Peggy und Marco Lachmann-Anke from Pixabay

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