"Sorry is the hardest word": Apologies in the Media and Corporate World

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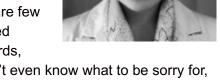
We're delighted to announce Nina M. Chung as the winner of the StockWell Communications Polis Research Prize. This year, the award went to the best research proposal by an LSE post-graduate student on the topic of **'Corporate Reputation, Media and Society'.** Nina will be spending time later this year with StockWell on a paid internship to carry out more work on her research topic. Nina's proposal is published in full below.

Are You Sorry Yet?: The Purpose of Apologies in the Media and Corporate World

"Sorry seems to be the hardest word," croons Elton John, and we know it. There are few things more complex than the tangle of emotions, history and social norms involved when we owe or accept an apology. Sometimes we botch it, fumbling over our words, saying them at the wrong time, addressing the wrong person; other times, we don't even know what to be sorry for, or what to expect after we say so. And this is just between you and me. What happens when the players get bigger, the stakes get higher, and there's a messenger sitting in the middle?

This research project explores how the act of apology changes when it involves corporations in the public eye, where print and broadcast journalists mediate news for the masses. It seeks out patterns in how the media evaluate the authenticity of corporate apologies following their faux pas, and the strategies companies consider around the apology itself. At the macro level, this project investigates if the purpose of apologies in society is ultimately to reaffirm and maintain social order, as some scholars suggest. If this is the case, it behooves organizations to fully understand the societal norms within which they operate and direct their statements.

The relevance of this research is rooted in three realities:

1. Most people choose or are compelled to learn about their world through the filter of media, whose technologies are increasingly instantaneous;

2. Many companies maintain multiple global headquarters, which means their audiences are no longer bounded within one quarter;

3. Human beings have a sense of what is good and right, but more often what is very wrong, and often object loudly to what we see as the latter.

Today, in other words, a company can make a split-second misstep that floods Twitter and enrages the world before anyone can say "Oops." Corporations and PR firms find themselves in panic, drawing upon axioms of crisis management to guide their next immediate news moment. However, one of this project's objectives is to draw out the bigger picture: how the deeply personal act of apology is controverted, politicized and transformed on the spot-lit stage of global corporations and mass media.

Research in this area has room for various angles, including a focus on the linguistic nuances successful and unsuccessful apologies have exhibited in the past; what "success" even means in this context; or how business executives and journalists vary in their definition of the public "apology."This research project will be informed by perspectives across the fields of media and communications, international relations, business management and social psychology. A relative lack of theoretical literature on corporate apology also promises to make this a challenging and interesting endeavour. Finally, the generous support of StockWell Communications and LSE Polis allows this project unique depth and access to business executives and journalists, whose industry expertise can

only enrich an otherwise limited study. I am truly grateful to the two institutions for this opportunity, and excited for the inevitable surprises around the corner.

Research proposal by Nina M. Chung.