COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

Natalia Rodríguez Salcedo
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0968-0447
nrodriguez@unav.es
Universidad de Navarra

ISSN 0214-0039
E ISSN 2386-7876
www.communication-society.com

2026 – Vol. 39 (1)
pp. 433-434

How to cite this book review:
Rodríguez Salcedo, N. (2026). *Corporate Trauma: The Toxic Legacy of a Crisis*. (Bibliography. Book review). *Communication & Society, 39*(1), 433-434. https://doi.org/10.15581/003.39.1.028

Bibliography. Book review

Corporate Trauma: The Toxic Legacy of a Crisis

John Oliver

Published by De Gruyter, 2025, 160 pp. ISBN: 978-3-11-157083-9

Every company is either in crisis, about to be in crisis, or recovering from one. This insight by Harold Burson, the pioneer of modern public relations and founder of Burson, has long shaped both corporate communication practice and scholarship, framing crisis not as an anomaly, but as a structural condition of organizational life. While this perspective has underpinned a vast body of research on preparedness and response, it has also narrowed analytical focus to the acute moment of disruption. In an environment of sustained volatility—marked by geopolitical tensions, fragile supply chains and energy uncertainty—such temporal myopia is increasingly insufficient. In Corporate Trauma: The Toxic Legacy of a Crisis, John Oliver shifts the analytical lens toward the aftermath, examining the longer-term organizational consequences that crises leave behind.

At the core of the book lies the concept of "corporate trauma", defined as the enduring cultural and organizational imprint generated by a significant crisis. Oliver argues that crises do not simply disrupt operations or damage reputation in the short term; they can also trigger deeper adaptive responses that persist over time, acting as a "hidden killer" of business turnarounds. These responses often manifest in heightened risk aversion, reduced innovation capacity, and recurring leadership instability, shaping organizational performance well beyond the initial event, particularly in contexts of repeated or overlapping disruptions.

The book follows a clear progression from conceptual framing to empirical analysis and prescriptive guidance. The opening chapter revisits the limits of conventional turnaround strategies -such as leadership replacement, cost reduction and restructuring- arguing that they frequently fail because they address visible symptoms while leaving underlying cultural distortions unexamined. Drawing an intellectual bridge to the biological field of epigenetics, Oliver suggests that just as environmental stress can alter gene expression in living organisms, a major corporate crisis may leave lasting imprints or "scars" on an organization's culture and performance (chapter 2). Crucially, he extends this analogy to propose a transgenerational dynamic, whereby dysfunctional attitudes are reproduced across successive leadership teams and employees long after the original event has passed.

Subsequent chapters (3 and 4) develop a diagnostic framework aimed at identifying corporate trauma through measurable "physiological" and "psychological" markers. Particularly noteworthy is the longitudinal analysis of language in corporate reporting, used to trace shifts in attitudes toward risk and innovation. This methodological approach seeks to capture how organizational mindsets evolve over time, moving beyond purely financial indicators.

The empirical core applies this framework to a series of well-known corporate cases, including AIG, Barclays, BlackBerry, BP, Wells Fargo and Volkswagen (chapter 5). Across these cases, Oliver identifies recurring patterns of post-crisis adaptation. While organizations initially respond to crises by stabilizing operations, they often develop more defensive cultures over time, characterized by caution, reduced experimentation and heightened sensitivity to risk. Such adaptations, while understandable in context, may become entrenched and constrain future strategic flexibility.

The final chapter introduces the "Corporate Trauma Playbook", a structured process designed to support organizational recovery. Here, strategic communication is positioned not merely as reputation management, but as a central mechanism for rebuilding trust and enabling cultural transformation.

Oliver's contribution is particularly relevant in a context often described as one of "permacrisis" and "polycrisis", where the capacity to recover cannot be understood solely in operational terms. By foregrounding the internal and longer-term consequences of crises, Corporate Trauma adds a valuable dimension to existing debates on organizational resilience.

At the same time, the book opens up several compelling avenues for further scholarly discussion. For instance, the analogy with epigenetics, while conceptually suggestive, remains largely metaphorical and would benefit from deeper theoretical explorations. Likewise, the use of retrospective case studies presents an opportunity to further examine the complex causal links between historical crises and long-term organizational trajectories. Finally, the focus on internal dynamics leaves relatively underexplored the role of digital environments—particularly social media—in shaping contemporary forms of organizational memory and amplification of crisis effects.

Despite these observations, Corporate Trauma offers an original and thought-provoking perspective on the study of corporate crises. Its central claim—that the consequences of a crisis extend far beyond its immediate resolution—effectively challenges the tendency to equate recovery with closure. Instead, Oliver invites the reader to consider how organizations may carry the legacy of crises in less visible but highly consequential ways.

Ultimately, the book makes a meaningful contribution to both scholarship and practice, by encouraging a shift from short-term, event-driven models of crisis management toward a more longitudinal and internally focused perspective. In doing so, it provides a useful framework particularly relevant for corporate communication, offering a vital tool for understanding how organizations interpret, internalize, and communicate their resilience, ensuring the toxic legacy of a crisis does not permanently distort the corporate narrative or stakeholder trust.

ISSN 2386-7876 – © 2026 Communication & Society, 39(1), 433-434