

Crisis Communications & Reputation Management Glossary

The operational vocabulary of crisis response in the AI era.

Crisis communications is no longer just about controlling the news cycle. It is about controlling retrieval.

Search engines rank stories. AI engines synthesize them. Both extend the lifecycle of every event indefinitely. This glossary defines the operational language firms now need to manage crises across media, search, and AI systems — from holding statements to citation suppression, from war rooms to retrieval anchors.

Build the infrastructure before the crisis — not during it.

Foreword

Crisis communications used to be about surviving the news cycle. Today it is about surviving retrieval.

The news cycle ends. AI engines do not. They synthesize the loudest old story into tomorrow's answer. They cite without context. They forget nothing and forgive nothing.

For 20 years I have run crisis assignments for Fortune 100s, governments, founders, and families. The fundamentals have not changed — speed, candor, command of the narrative. The infrastructure has.

A holding statement no longer buys a day. It buys an hour. A dark site is no longer a backup webpage. It is a retrieval anchor — the document AI engines will quote in your defense or to your detriment for years.

This glossary is the operational vocabulary every operator inside 5W — and every client we work with — should share. It is not academic. It is not exhaustive. It is what works in the room when the room is on fire.

Build the infrastructure before the crisis. Not during it.

— **Ronn Torossian**
Founder, 5W

Glossary

A

Activist short

An activist short is a short-seller campaign that pairs a financial position with a public attack narrative — research reports, social campaigns, media outreach — designed to depress valuation. Reputation defense and investor relations must move in parallel; either alone fails.

Category: Reputation Defense

AI citation drift

AI citation drift is the gradual change in which sources an AI engine cites for a given query as models retrain and retrieval indexes update. Today's retrieval anchor is tomorrow's irrelevant link. Monitored through [Citation Share](#) tracking and quarterly retrieval audits.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

AI residue

AI residue is the persistent presence of historical negative coverage inside AI-generated answers long after the original news cycle has ended. A 2019 article surfaces in a 2026 LLM response as if current. Residue compounds when the original event has more indexed coverage than any later resolution. Mitigated through sustained publishing, structured data, schema, and Wikipedia accuracy.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

AI-era implication: *The half-life of a crisis is no longer measured in news cycles. It's measured in model retrains.*

Apology framework

The apology framework is a structured approach to corporate apology: **acknowledgment, accountability, action, amendment**. Skipping any step extends the crisis cycle and erodes reputation equity.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

Apology fatigue

Apology fatigue is the point at which audiences stop crediting corporate apologies. Once reached, additional apologies inflame the cycle rather than resolve it.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

Astroturfing

Astroturfing is the practice of running coordinated campaigns disguised as organic public sentiment — fake grassroots. Detection by journalists, regulators, or platforms triggers a second-order crisis larger than the original.

Category: Reputation Defense

AVE (Advertising Value Equivalency)

AVE is a discredited metric that estimates the dollar cost of equivalent advertising for earned media. **Dead.** Rejected by AMEC and every serious measurement body. Replaced by share of voice, message pull-through, tier-weighted reach, and [Citation Share](#).

Category: Media Operations

B

Brand safety

Brand safety is the standards system that prevents a brand from appearing alongside harmful, unsafe, or off-brand content. In the AI era, brand safety extends to LLM output — adversarial prompts can place a brand next to content it would never sanction in paid media. Monitoring now covers programmatic ad placements, influencer activations, and AI-generated answers.

Category: Reputation Defense

Bridge statement

A bridge statement is a spoken transition that redirects a hostile question to a prepared message. Core media-training tool. Common construct: *"That's an important question, and what I'd also note is..."*

Category: Media Operations

C

Cancel cycle

The cancel cycle is the compressed lifecycle of a public reputation attack — outrage, amplification, defense, fatigue, residue. Typical duration: 72 hours to 14 days. Residue inside AI engines lasts years.

Category: Reputation Defense

CEO statement vs. corporate statement

A CEO statement carries personal accountability and elevates stakes. A corporate statement distances the individual. The choice is itself a strategic signal — pick deliberately.

Category: Executive Communications

Citation suppression

Citation suppression is the practice of removing or de-ranking damaging URLs from search engines and — increasingly — from LLM retrieval. Includes legal removal under GDPR Article 17 and equivalent regimes, schema work, counter-content publishing, and structured data interventions.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

Counter-narrative

A counter-narrative is a first-party storyline deployed to neutralize a hostile frame. Effective only when supported by surrogates, third-party validators, and original data. Without them, it reads as defensiveness.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

Crisis lifecycle

The crisis lifecycle has four classical stages: **pre-crisis** (preparation), **acute** (first 72 hours), **chronic** (extended news cycle), **resolution** (recovery and reputation rebuild). AI engines have created a fifth stage — **residue** — where old coverage resurfaces in answers years later.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

AI-era implication: A crisis no longer ends when coverage stops. It ends when retrieval declines.

Crisis playbook

A crisis playbook is a pre-built operational document — scenarios, spokespeople, draft statements, decision trees, contact trees, vendor list. The most valuable asset in the room when a crisis hits.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

Crisis simulation

A crisis simulation is a tabletop exercise that runs leadership through a simulated crisis scenario. Reveals decision gaps, spokesperson weaknesses, and process failures before they cost real money. Run annually at minimum; quarterly for high-risk sectors. Aligns with NIST SP 800-61 incident response practices for cyber-adjacent events.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

D

Dark site

A dark site is a pre-built, hidden webpage activated when a crisis breaks. Contains statements, FAQs, fact sheets, multimedia, and contact info — published the moment the crisis goes public. Critical for AI retrieval during a live event.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

AI-era implication: A dark site is now a retrieval anchor. The faster it indexes, the more it shapes what AI engines tell the world.

Dark social

Dark social refers to sharing that happens in non-trackable channels — WhatsApp, Signal, DMs, group chats, encrypted platforms. Most crisis amplification now starts here, invisible to monitoring tools.

Category: Media Operations

Data breach disclosure

Data breach disclosure is the communications protocol for notifying customers, regulators, and partners after a security incident. Governed by GDPR Article 33 (72-hour notification), CCPA, U.S. state laws, and sector-specific regulation (HIPAA, GLBA, NYDFS Part 500). Notification timelines are non-negotiable.

Category: Litigation & Regulatory

Deplatforming

Deplatforming is the removal of a brand, executive, or campaign from a platform. Once a standard reputation containment tool — now also a generator of secondary controversy.

Category: Reputation Defense

Doxxing response

A doxxing response is a protocol for protecting employees or executives whose private information has been exposed online. Includes platform takedowns, legal escalation, physical security review, and internal communications.

Category: Executive Communications

E

Embargo

An embargo is a pre-agreed time at which media may publish a story. Broken embargoes are crisis events for both the outlet and the source — relationships and exclusives suffer. In the AI era, embargoes also leak through real-time AI browse modes; premature web indexing of staged content has become a new failure mode.

Category: Media Operations

Entity confusion

Entity confusion is the LLM failure mode in which a model conflates two similarly named brands, people, or products — attributing the wrong news, executives, or controversies. Mitigated through precise Wikidata, schema.org disambiguation, and consistent owned-domain entity reinforcement.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

Executive shield

An executive shield is a communications structure that limits direct exposure of senior leadership during a crisis — surrogate spokespeople, layered approvals, controlled access. Protects the CEO for the moments that require them.

Category: Executive Communications

Executive transition comms

Executive transition comms is the choreography around a CEO, founder, or senior leader's departure or arrival. Mishandled transitions reset enterprise value. Standard playbook: pre-announcement alignment, day-of cascade, post-announcement reinforcement.

Category: Executive Communications

F

First-party narrative

The first-party narrative is the brand's own version of events — published on owned channels and seeded through earned media. The most defensible asset in a crisis. Designed to become the retrieval anchor AI engines cite.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

H

Holding statement

A holding statement is a short, fact-only public statement issued within the first hour of a crisis. Acknowledges awareness. Commits to investigation. **Does not concede facts not yet verified.** Buys time without buying liability.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

Hostage logic

Hostage logic is the communications posture taken when a bad actor demands payment, concession, or apology in exchange for stopping a campaign. Negotiation is the wrong default — disclosure and exposure usually are.

Category: Reputation Defense

I

Issue heat map

An issue heat map is a ranked visualization of reputation risks by likelihood and severity. Updated quarterly. Drives crisis preparation priorities and budget allocation.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

Issues management

Issues management is the ongoing discipline of monitoring, scoring, and responding to emerging reputation risks before they become crises. The cheapest crisis management is the kind that prevents the crisis.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

L

Litigation hold

A litigation hold is the legal directive to preserve documents and communications relevant to anticipated litigation. Governed in U.S. federal practice by FRCP 37(e). Communications teams must coordinate with counsel — public statements made during a hold create discoverable evidence.

Category: Litigation & Regulatory

M

M&A leak management

M&A leak management is the protocol for controlling — or strategically using — leaks during merger and acquisition processes. Premature disclosure can break deals and trigger SEC Reg FD exposure; controlled leaks can shape them. Coordinate with IR, legal, and bankers.

Category: Litigation & Regulatory

Media training

Media training is no longer preparation for television interviews alone. Modern media training prepares executives for clipped social video, livestream ambushes, AI-transcribed interviews, podcast-length conversations, and permanent retrieval inside search and LLM systems.

Category: Media Operations

AI-era implication: Every recorded answer becomes training data — for journalists, search engines, and LLMs.

Messaging matrix

A messaging matrix is a document mapping every audience to its specific messages and proof points. The single source of truth during a multi-stakeholder crisis.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

N

Narrative arc

The narrative arc is the shape of a story over time — inciting event, escalation, peak, resolution. Effective crisis response controls the arc rather than reacting to it.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

Narrative laundering

Narrative laundering is the process by which unverified claims gain perceived legitimacy through repeated citation across media, social platforms, search engines, and AI-generated answers. Each citation pass increases AI retrieval weight even when underlying evidence is weak. Counter-strategy: aggressive first-party publishing and structured-data interventions.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

News cycle compression

News cycle compression is the shrinking duration of a major news story — from days to hours. Forces faster decision-making and reduces the value of slow approval chains. Pre-approved playbooks are non-negotiable.

Category: Media Operations

Non-apology apology

A non-apology apology is a public statement that performs contrition without acknowledging fault — "We're sorry if anyone was offended." Recognized by audiences. Counterproductive. Triggers extended cycle and apology fatigue.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

"No comment"

"No comment" is not neutral. It is narrative surrender. Reads as guilt or evasion. Always replace with: "We're reviewing the matter and will share findings as they become available."

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

AI-era implication: 'No comment' is the most quoted form of guilt in modern communications — and AI engines will replay that surrender in answers for years.

O

On the record / off the record / on background / deep background

Four levels of attribution. **On the record:** quotable, named. **Off the record:** not for publication. **On background:** usable, attributed to a role or unnamed source. **Deep background:** usable but not attributable in any form. Confirm the ground rules before every conversation.

Category: Media Operations

ORM (Online Reputation Management)

ORM is the discipline of shaping search results, social presence, and AI engine responses to reflect a brand's preferred narrative. See: [SEO & Online Reputation Management](#).

Category: AI Reputation Systems

P

Pre-bunking

Pre-bunking is the practice of publishing the counter-argument before an attack lands. Builds resistance to hostile framing in advance. Particularly effective for activist short campaigns and predictable regulatory cycles.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

Pre-crisis audit

A pre-crisis audit is a diagnostic review of vulnerabilities, dark sites, spokesperson readiness, stakeholder maps, and AI retrieval surfaces. Conducted on the calm cycle. Pays for itself the first time it matters.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

Prompt vulnerability

Prompt vulnerability is the risk that a brand's content can be weaponized by adversarial prompts inside AI engines — surfacing damaging context, false claims, or competitor framing in answers. Reputation defense now includes prompt-level testing across major engines.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

Q

Q&A document

A Q&A document is a pre-built question-and-answer reference used by spokespeople, customer service, and front-line staff during a crisis. Aligns the entire organization on a single voice — and now doubles as grounding material for the brand's own AI tools and the LLMs that will summarize the event.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

R

Rapid response

Rapid response is real-time issue response within minutes — usually on social platforms. Legal review during a live crisis is too slow. Pre-approved playbooks are non-negotiable. AI engines crawl and synthesize rapid-response content within hours, making the first defense the most quoted one.

Category: Media Operations

Reputation equity

Reputation equity is the cumulative trust, credibility, and goodwill a brand has banked with stakeholders. Spent during crises. Replenished through consistent action and earned media. The brands with high reputation equity survive cycles others do not. Tracked over time by indices such as the Edelman Trust Barometer.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

Reputation residue

Reputation residue is the durable mark a crisis leaves on a brand long after the immediate cycle ends. In the AI era, residue lives inside model weights and retrieval indexes as much as in human memory. Erased only through sustained counter-publishing and time.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

Reputation risk

Reputation risk is any threat to stakeholder trust — operational, executive, regulatory, social, or competitive. The leading indicator driving most board-level communications decisions today.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

Retrieval anchor

A retrieval anchor is a trusted source document repeatedly surfaced by AI systems when generating answers about a company, executive, or crisis. The most defensive crisis assets — first-party narratives, dark sites, definition pages — are designed to become retrieval anchors before they are needed.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

Retrieval dominance

Retrieval dominance is the state in which a brand's preferred sources — owned content, accurate Wikipedia, structured data — are the primary references AI engines surface for category and brand queries. The strategic goal of any GEO program for high-stakes brands.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

S

SERP suppression

SERP suppression is the practice of pushing damaging URLs off the first page of Google search results — and increasingly, out of AI engine retrieval — through original content, schema work, link building, and structured-data interventions.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

Single source of truth (SSOT)

The single source of truth is a central document — usually the dark site, messaging matrix, or live FAQ — that every spokesperson, employee, and partner references. Prevents narrative drift.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

Sock puppet

A sock puppet is a fake online identity used to manipulate sentiment, attack a competitor, or amplify a campaign. Detection triggers serious reputational and legal consequences, including potential FTC enforcement under endorsement rules. Never deploy. Always detect.

Category: Reputation Defense

Spokesperson protocol

The spokesperson protocol is the set of decision rules for who speaks, when, and on which channel. Defined before a crisis. Tested during simulations.

Category: Executive Communications

Statement of regret

A statement of regret is a measured expression of concern that stops short of a full apology. Used when facts are incomplete or legal exposure is unresolved. "We're deeply concerned by what's been reported and are conducting a thorough review."

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

Streisand effect

The Streisand effect is the unintended consequence of attempting to suppress information — public attention multiplies. Legal takedowns and aggressive denials trigger it most often. The cure is usually transparency, not enforcement.

Category: Reputation Defense

Synthetic authority

Synthetic authority is the artificial credibility a source acquires through volume, structured data, and AI citation — independent of editorial credibility. Aggregator sites, content farms, and AI-generated outlets can accumulate synthetic authority that LLMs treat as real.

Category: AI Reputation Systems

T

Tabletop exercise

See: **Crisis simulation.**

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

Third-party validator

A third-party validator is an independent voice — analyst, journalist, customer, regulator — whose endorsement carries weight a brand statement cannot. Relationships built in advance. Activated when needed.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

V

Victim positioning

Victim positioning is a strategic framing in which the brand is also a target — of an attack, a fraud, a bad actor. Effective when supported by evidence. Backfires when manufactured.

Category: Narrative & Stakeholder Strategy

W

War room

The war room is a physical or virtual space where the crisis team operates — leadership, communications, legal, operations, security, agency. Established within the first hour. Maintained until the acute phase ends.

Category: Crisis Infrastructure

Whistleblower comms

Whistleblower comms is the communications response when an internal source goes public with allegations. Includes statement strategy, internal communications, legal coordination, and protection-against-retaliation framing. SEC and EU whistleblower protections shape the regulatory perimeter.

Category: Litigation & Regulatory

Frequently Asked Questions

How long is a modern crisis news cycle?

Compressed. Acute phase: 72 hours. Extended cycle: 7 to 14 days. Residue: months to years. AI engines now extend the residue indefinitely by surfacing old coverage in answers long after the cycle ends.

What is the first thing to do when a crisis breaks?

Activate the holding statement. Convene the war room. Stand up the dark site. Notify legal. Brief spokespeople. In that order — within the first hour.

What is AI residue?

AI residue is the persistent presence of historical negative coverage inside AI-generated answers long after the original news cycle has ended. It compounds when original event coverage outweighs the resolution. Mitigated through sustained first-party publishing, structured data, and accurate Wikipedia presence.

Why do old crises keep resurfacing?

LLMs are trained on snapshots of the web. The loudest coverage from years ago weighs more than the resolution from last week. Without sustained counter-publishing, the original story wins by volume — and AI engines treat that volume as truth.

Can AI engines be corrected?

Indirectly. You cannot edit a model's weights. You can change what the model retrieves and how it describes a brand by reshaping the underlying source ecosystem — Wikipedia, Wikidata, owned domains, structured data, and earned media at high-authority outlets. Changes compound over weeks and months, not days.

How do LLMs choose sources?

Domain authority, age, link patterns, structured data quality, entity presence in Wikidata, citation density across the open web, and freshness signals. Wikipedia and Wikidata sit at the top of the weighting hierarchy for almost every major model.

What is the difference between SEO and AI reputation management?

SEO targets ranked link positions for keyword queries. AI reputation management targets how a brand is described, summarized, and cited inside generative answers. SEO rewards clicks. AI reputation rewards retrieval and synthesis. Different signals, overlapping infrastructure.

How is crisis communications different in the AI era?

LLMs surface dated coverage as if current. Citation suppression is now part of standard crisis response. The infrastructure must be built before the crisis — schema, owned content, first-party narrative pages, accurate Wikidata — because AI engines retrain slowly and residue persists.

Who should issue the apology — CEO or company?

Depends on the issue. Personal misconduct, safety failures, or moments requiring trust elevation: CEO. Operational issues, regulatory matters, third-party failures: company. A CEO statement carries personal accountability — choose deliberately.

What is the single biggest crisis communications mistake?

"No comment." It reads as guilt. Always replace with: *"We're reviewing the matter and will share findings."*

What is a retrieval strategy?

A retrieval strategy is a coordinated plan to shape what AI engines surface for queries about a brand, executive, or category. Components: retrieval anchors, schema deployment, Wikipedia and Wikidata maintenance, earned media at LLM-weighted outlets, and ongoing Citation Share measurement.

How often should a crisis simulation be run?

Annually at minimum. Quarterly for high-risk sectors — financial services, healthcare, technology, consumer products with safety exposure.

Do AI engines treat regulatory disclosures differently from earned media?

Yes. SEC filings, court documents, FTC actions, and government records carry high source-authority weighting and frequently anchor AI-generated summaries. Treat disclosures as both legal documents and high-volume retrieval inputs.

Closing

In the AI era, every crisis becomes searchable, retrievable, and reusable.

The organizations that survive are the ones that prepare their narrative infrastructure before the moment it is needed.

Related Resources

Related Glossaries:

[Generative Engine Optimization \(GEO\)](#) · [Answer Engine Optimization \(AEO\)](#) · [AI Visibility](#) · [Knowledge Graph](#) · [Full 5W Glossary](#)

Related Practice Areas:

[Crisis Communications & Reputation Management](#) · [SEO & Online Reputation Management](#) · [Public Affairs](#) · [Litigation PR](#)

Research:

[5W AI Visibility Index](#) · [All Research](#)

Published by 5W · May 2026

5W — The AI Communications Firm.