



## From liftoff to landing: NASA's crisis communications and resulting media coverage following the *Challenger* and *Columbia* tragedies

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### Abstract

NASA's public relations effort following the explosion of the *Challenger* in 1986 is considered an example of crisis communications failure. After the *Columbia* disaster in 2003, NASA was praised for its successful handling of the crisis. This paper identifies how four newspapers presented NASA's crisis communication efforts following the two crises, utilizing widely accepted crisis communication concepts associated with stakeholder theory. Results showed that the print media reported that NASA followed specific communicative practices and accorded NASA more positive coverage following the *Columbia* disaster than the *Challenger* disaster.

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### 1. Introduction

At 11:38 a.m. EST on January 28, 1986, the space shuttle *Challenger* launched skyward beginning its tenth mission into outer space. The flight had been delayed for 3 days because of poor weather, and NASA officials eagerly watched as the shuttle finally got off the ground. Then, the unthinkable occurred. Approximately 73 seconds and 10 miles after takeoff, the spacecraft suddenly exploded leaving only two

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white lines of smoke racing through the air. All seven passengers on board were killed (Broad, 1986). The *Challenger* explosion, although not the first NASA mission resulting in loss of life, was the most horrific event in the history of the United States space program—until it happened again.

On February 1, 2003, 17 years after NASA lost the crew aboard *Challenger*, the agency experienced yet another crisis of tragic proportions. The space shuttle *Columbia*, as it was traveling at 12,500 miles per hour 40 miles above the earth's surface, blew apart as it attempted to re-enter the atmosphere at approximately 9 a.m. EST. Once again, all seven astronauts on the mission lost their lives (Sanger, 2003a).

Immediately following each of these horrific events, NASA officials faced many of the same public relations problems. Questions were coming in at warp speed, answers were scarce, accusations were flying, rumors spread like wildfire, and everyone wanted answers—now. How NASA communicated in the minutes, hours, and days following each event would be key to how the agency's publics would react. This, however, is where crisis communications experts would say the similarities ended (Baron, 2003; Dickey, 2003; Gustin & Sheehy, 2003; Marshall, 1986).

NASA's public relations effort following the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger* is widely considered a textbook example of a crisis communications failure (Marshall, 1986). After the *Columbia* disaster, however, NASA public affairs officials received praise as well as criticism for a more successful handling of the crisis (Cabbage & Harwood, 2004; Columbia Accident Investigation Board, 2003; Joint Hearing, 2003). U.S. Senator John McCain, speaking before the Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics, said on February 12, 2003, "Many have noted the vast improvement of the release of information, as compared to the *Challenger* tragedy of 1986" (Joint Hearing, 2003). Therefore, it would seem to follow that the media coverage NASA received after the *Columbia* tragedy would be more positive than the coverage of NASA after the *Challenger* disaster. But is this really the case? This study identifies how the print media presented the crisis communication efforts of NASA following the agency's two largest crises, utilizing widely accepted crisis communication concepts, specifically, stakeholder theory (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000).<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Method

A quantitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the extent to which news stories following *Challenger* and *Columbia* contained evidence of five criteria for successful crisis communications with stakeholders through the media: (1) prompt response (Barnett, 2003; Ogrizek & Gullery, 1999; Umansky, 2001), (2) truth/avoidance of absolutes (Duke & Masland, 2002; Stanton, 2002), (3) constant flow of information (Gaschen, 2003; Geibel, 1996), (4) concern for victims and their families (Coombs, 1999; Zerman, 1995), and (5) choice of appropriate spokesperson(s) (Gustin & Sheehy, 2003; Horsley & Barker, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Most experts advocate holistic public relations efforts aimed at anticipating crises, planning for crises, communicating during crises, and identifying those affected by crisis situations (Horsley & Barker, 2002). Crisis communication theories have advanced from reactive approaches such as apologia (Coombs, 1998; Hearit, 1994; Ihlen, 2002; Ware & Linkugel, 1973), image repair theory (Benoit, 1997), neoinstitutionalism and attribution theories (Coombs & Holladay, 1996), to more proactive methods such as the symbolic approach (Coombs, 1998). The central focus of crisis communication now expands the emphasis on the organization's needs to also include how publics are affected by an organization's actions. Stakeholder theory postulates that organizations that want to survive crises must maintain positive relationships with their stakeholders, including news media, stockholders, consumers, workers, suppliers, creditors, competitors, professional groups, government agencies, and the community (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2000).

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