



Political communication and disasters: A four-country analysis of how politicians should talk before, during and after disasters



Jacqui Ewart ^{a,*}, Hamish McLean ^b, Kate Ames ^c

^a School of Humanities, Griffith University, Nathan, QLD 4111, Australia

^b School of Humanities, Griffith University, Nathan, QLD 4111, Australia

^c CQ University, Brisbane, QLD 4000, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 11 December 2015

Keywords:

Media talk
Political performance
Politicians
Disaster communication

ABSTRACT

Politicians are increasingly involving themselves in the frontline delivery of information in the lead up to disasters and as they unfold. They are often placed as spokespeople and represent the public face of disaster, be it anthropogenic or natural. A disaster also offers opportunities for a politician to participate in intense media coverage and build their profile. However, this represents potential conflict within the disaster management environment when a disaster response is being coordinated by senior public servants or emergency response personnel. This paper examines the observations of senior emergency managers about politicians' communication with various publics before during and after disasters. Analysis is based on interviews conducted in four countries, Australia, Norway, the United Kingdom and Germany. While emergency managers believe the involvement of politicians in communicating about disasters is important, they would prefer that politicians restrict their activities during the response phase of such events. This paper reviews interview data to reveal the role-based expectations of politicians by emergency managers. Our findings have implications for the management of disasters, and the involvement of politicians in communication about these events.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

There is a growing body of research that explores communication and disasters generally (see for example Seeger, 2006; Spence et al., 2007) but much less attention has been paid to the performance of political actors and their involvement in disasters communication with various publics. Effective communication in the three stages of disasters – preparation, response and recovery – is vital in ensuring publics affected by a disaster respond in a timely manner to warnings and engage with the recovery process (Lowrey et al., 2007). Communication with affected publics is mainly achieved through media engagement and interaction.

Despite the emerging role of social media as a communication tool for those charged with managing a disaster, traditional news media still provides a valuable means of getting information to those affected by disasters and the wider community (Cohen et al., 2006; Cretokis et al., 2008; Ewart and Dekker, 2013; Keys, 1993). Radio continues to have a significant role during the impact phase of a disaster (Piotrowski and Armstrong, 1998; Hindman and Coyle, 1999; Cretokis et al., 2008; Moody, 2009; McKay, 1983;

North and Dearman, 2010) providing immediate information often in the absence of electricity (Perez-Lugo, 2004), and a sense of connectedness and community (Ewart and Dekker, 2013; Littlefield and Quenette, 2007). Piotrowski and Armstrong (1998) identified that television plays a key role in information provision prior to a disaster occurring, but it is radio that matters as a disaster unfolds. It is also clear that different forms of media play different roles for their audiences and those directly affected by disasters (Bainbridge and Galloway, 2010; Mitroff, 2004; Pantti and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Tierney et al., 2006; Vasterman et al., 2005). Local media, that is news media that are located in and that serve the areas and communities where disasters are about to occur, have an important role in preparing residents for a disaster and in assisting their recovery (Anthony and Sellnow, 2011). There is a high level of public trust in local media because they are an integral part of the community and the geographical area they serve, and unlike other media, their motivations are not necessarily financial (Anthony and Sellnow, 2011).

This paper examines the attitudes of senior emergency managers in four countries towards the engagement of politicians with various publics before, during and after disasters, via the media. The perspectives of senior emergency managers in relation to the way politicians' engage with publics via the media are important because the manner in which political actors engage with the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: j.ewart@griffith.edu.au (J. Ewart).

news media and their publics during disasters has significant potential to impact on the management of disaster communications. The efficacy or otherwise of politicians' interactions with news media and those impacted by disasters impacts on others involved in disaster response. This article first considers previous research into politicians and disaster communication. It then specifically considers the way emergency managers reflect on the performance of politicians during disaster, and considers themes of performance, liveliness, and interactivity through the work of Tolson (2006) as they apply to political performance via media. Analysis is not of media text; rather, it is of the way political actions are interpreted and articulated within the discursive framework of 'disaster communication'. We argue our unique findings have significance for those tasked with managing disasters and in particular with negotiating the involvement of politicians in communication about such events.

2. Politicians and disaster communication

When we began our work in this field several years ago, it became obvious that best practice models do not account for the involvement and performance of political actors in communicating about disasters. However, the question of the credibility of political actors in relation to information provision about disasters has been previously identified as a problem. The performance of those involved in delivering messages via the news media about disasters is crucial to those messages being taken up by people affected by disasters. For example, Wei et al. (2010, p. 1060) identified four critical factors in relation to the use of television as a crisis communication tool. They are the content of the messages, the channels used, who delivered the information i.e. the source and the ways in which the messages were delivered. Importantly, these researchers found that the provision of information during a disaster was "always a political decision" (Wei et al., 2010, p. 1060). Indeed, research into politicians and disasters has mainly focused on how public perceptions of politicians' response to disasters have affected their chances of re-election (Arceneaux and Stein, 2006).

Hurricane Katrina stands out as an example whereby political actors and others were criticised for their particularly poor communication. Key aspects of source credibility in public communication are intelligence, character and good will, particularly as they are important in relation to building trust and respect with audiences (Cole and Fellows, 2008). Cole and Fellows found that communication between politicians and government officials and the residents of New Orleans about Hurricane Katrina involved confusing messages, a lack of source credibility and an inability for different sources to get the same message across to affected publics. Ultimately this damaged the trust residents had in different levels of government because "neither government promises nor active attention had materialized" (Cole and Fellows, 2008, p. 218). These failures, combined with unclear messaging and conflicting use of terminology, meant many residents did not understand the need to evacuate the area and so they stayed. Cole and Fellows (2008, p. 225) suggested that "collaboration with community leaders" was a key aspect of planning for disasters.

In another study about communication during disasters, Reynolds (2009, p. 2) identified that members of the public judge emergency messages as follows: "Was it timely?" "Can I trust this source?" and "Are they being honest?" For political actors who might be involved in disaster communications, this is a significant point. For Reynolds, the political leader needs to take on a role of mobilising the community to assist those affected by the disaster. Research by Lamb et al. (2012) about the authority of those presenting disaster messages found that the presenter's level of

authority and the message script did not significantly affect the reported likelihood of evacuation. However, the perceptions of trust, clarity, and message authority increased with higher levels of presenter authority. The participants said they would place the greatest trust in evacuation information from the highest role within Civil Defence and Emergency Management followed by local police. There was little if any trust in the Prime Minister as a source. Lamb and colleagues recommended that official evacuation messages should be delivered by a person in the highest role appropriate to increase trust in these messages (Lamb et al., 2012).

Perceptions that political actors have mis-managed a disaster can lead to attempts, particularly by the news media, to apportion blame (Erikson, 1994; Hood, 2002; Knobloch-Westerwick and Taylor, 2008; McMullan and McClung, 2006; Olson, 2000; Littlefield and Quenette, 2007). Arceneaux and Stein (2006) point out that public responses to disasters by political actors and the speed at which they seem to respond to the events are directly connected to the laying of blame by the public and the news media. Public perceptions of failure in this regard will result in punishment of incumbent politicians (2006). Given this, it is important that politicians recognise that their encounters with publics via the news media shape public responses and the apportionment of blame.

One way that political actors communicate more effectively with publics about disasters was identified by Griffin-Padgett and Donnetrice (2010) in a comparison of the leadership styles of New York Mayor Rudolph Guiliani during 9/11 and New Orleans' Mayor Ray Nagin during Hurricane Katrina. Their suggestion is that leaders use an approach of restorative rhetoric which is primarily focussed on helping disaster survivors to cope. By *creating public identities* as leaders in the crisis Giuliani and Nagin emerged as successful leaders in the eyes of their publics. Griffin-Padgett and Donnetrice identified that Giuliani's tactic was to make strong statements which were designed to reassure publics while also galvanising action amongst those affected (2010). While Nagin was somewhat restricted in his ability to show a similar style of leadership due to a lack of information about the strength of the hurricane, his crisis management style included being visible:

He maintained his presence through constant interviews on television and local radio-to communicate up-to-the-hour reports on the state of the city and surrounding areas. The mayor not only used media to help him frame the crisis situation, but also to critique the slow rate of response and the lack of resources (Griffin-Padgett and Donnetrice, 2010, p. 389).

Political leadership styles are generally seen to be very important in disasters communication as de Bussy and Paterson (2012) found in their comparison of the leadership styles of the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard and the then Premier Anna Bligh during the 2011 Queensland floods. By studying Twitter posts that mentioned the two leaders, they found that those posting about the leadership style of Bligh were consistently positive, praising her leadership, charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration. de Bussy and Paterson (2012, p. 328) identified that Tweeters were 'very moved' by the Premier and words such as 'class act', 'bloody legend' and 'inspiring' appear frequently. Bligh's responses to the 2011 floods were compared with Giuliani's leadership style after the 2001 terrorist attacks on New York. In strong contrast to the perceptions of Bligh's performance, Gillard was seen as a leader without charisma nor inspiration, but as a leader going about the daily business of government. The researchers concluded that charisma and inspiration were key factors in effective political leadership at times of disasters.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1100506>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1100506>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)