



Information subsidies and agenda-building during the Israel–Lebanon crisis^{☆,☆☆}

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the impact of information subsidies on media coverage during a crisis. Using the July 2006 Israel–Lebanon conflict as a backdrop, this research reviewed access that U.S. military public affairs officers provided the media and analyzed subsequent coverage for the presence of the military's message. Coverage was more neutral to positive than negative. Items containing organizational messages were more positive; those quoting practitioner-facilitated sources introduced organizational messages into coverage and generated more positive coverage. Access to information subsidies had a positive impact on coverage and aided in the successful transfer of attribute salience from practitioners to the media.

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In times of crisis, public relations practitioners often do not have to work as hard to get the attention of the media – and subsequently the public – to focus news coverage on their organizations and issues. Instead, practitioners facilitate coverage by the media that helps communicate the organization's perspective through the independent third-party verification reporters provide. During these times, practitioners are likely to see an increase in journalists using the information subsidies practitioners provide and more issue salience transferred in what is known as the agenda-building process. As a result, the messages organizations develop in response to crises can help define issues in media coverage of events. In cases such as these, practitioners' roles move beyond simple agenda-setting to attribute agenda-setting as a part of the agenda-building process. In an effort to understand how these processes interact with other information subsidy variables, we examined the actual information subsidies military public affairs provided reporters during the military-led evacuation of Americans from Lebanon.

In essence, this study tested two ideas—first, information subsidies provided by practitioners introduce organizational messages that result in a transfer of salience to media coverage. Second, increased media access has the potential to result in a more positive tone of coverage. This research does not propose that information subsidies and access are the only factors at work in defining attributes of a media-covered issue, but rather begins work in uncovering relationships between such variables.

The organization message examined here is viewed through the lens of agenda building/attribute agenda setting. Most attribute agenda-setting studies examine attributes from the journalism perspective. That is, these studies focus on the

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attributes journalists use and frames employed in the reporting of a particular issue. While public relations scholars have shown interest in agenda setting, there is a need for more work to be done examining the role information subsidies play in providing journalists with the practitioner-defined attributes for an issue during a crisis.

1. Literature

Research focused on the concepts invested here – the relationship between the practitioner-defined attributes (i.e., organizational message, talking points) and those successfully transferred to media coverage – is often referred to as *agenda building* (Curtin & Rhodenbaugh, 2001). Much of this material from practitioners is delivered to the media by way of information subsidy, a term coined by Gandy in 1982 to describe controlled access to information and materials that comes with little or no effort on the part of the recipient.

Journalists rely heavily on information subsidies such as making sources available, news releases, and other practitioner-produced products (VanSlyke Turk, 1985, 1986). As much as 80% of news content comes from such information (Cameron, Sallot, & Curtin, 1997; Lee & Solomon, 1990; McManus, 1994). Even so, journalists prefer to appear autonomous in the reporting process and use such subsidies less directly than merely reprinting a press release (Pincus, Rimmer, Rayfield, & Cropp, 1993; VanSlyke Turk, 1985). For example, a journalist may prefer to interview someone connected to the story and work with practitioners to gain access rather than republishing quotes made in a statement, using the subsidy that we call *media access*. Holladay (2007) found first-responders (non-public relations personnel) were cited more often than official communication sources, which may be the product of either providing the media access to these individuals or journalists seeking out non-public relations people as sources.

For many issues, government sources rank among the most successful information subsidies for practitioners, as journalists rely on and trust these sources (Lacy & Coulson, 2000; Witt, 1974). Tanner (2004) found reporters relied on issue-specific sources (even subsidizers) for scientific or technical details. In crises, journalists also rely on victims as well as government officials, as was the case during Hurricane Andrew (Salwen, 1995), and this trend continues (Holladay, 2007).

Cameron et al. (1997) asserted the success of agenda building lies in the acceptance of information subsidies and their frames (i.e., issue attributes, subtopics, talking points). In this way, attribute agenda setting becomes an important component in agenda building (McCombs, 1997). For public relations, these attributes could easily be described as talking points practitioners prepare to respond to media inquiries. Here, talking points and attributes are used interchangeably.

Overall, there is much support for the notion that public relations counsel positively correlates an increase of issue salience and tone in media coverage (Kioussis & Wu, 2006; Ohl, Pincus, Rimmer, & Harrison, 1995). Ohl et al. (1995) found practitioners successful in agenda building impacted the frequency of items in news coverage and the transfer of salience regarding the organization's message (i.e., talking points). Others too have noted similar impact (Albritton & Manheim, 1983; Kioussis, Mitrook, Wu, & Seltzer, 2006; Manheim & Albritton, 1984; Zhang & Cameron, 2003).

Here, the information subsidies used in the agenda-building process included press releases; media queries to public affairs; interviews with practitioners, leadership, participating servicemembers, and Americans leaving Lebanon (in person and mediated through communication technology); and a constantly updated fact sheet on a military Web site. Generally, leadership provided the technical details of the operation while participating servicemembers and evacuated Americans provided first-person accounts that could be classified as "human interest."

2. Methods

This study uses quantitative content analysis to analyze the agenda-building process through attribute agenda setting during a crisis. Previous studies have also concentrated on pieces of attribute agenda setting without examining the entire process (Golan & Wanta, 2001), as we do by examining subtopics of the overall issue. During the July 2006 evacuation of Americans from war-torn Lebanon, the U.S. military managed the operations; Navy ships, chartered commercial vessels, and military helicopters ferried nearly 15,000 American citizens from Lebanon to safe havens in Cyprus and Turkey in one of the largest evacuations ever conducted by the U.S. military.

The public affairs agenda is derived from the public affairs guidance used by the military, and the journalist agenda is derived through the content analysis described here. A transfer of salience is said to occur here when the talking point attributes (official military message from the public affairs guidance) appear in the media coverage, as then the public affairs practitioners will have successfully communicated the organizational message to the media.

It is important here to define subsidy. An information subsidy includes both information and media access to either a place (embed) or person (source). A reporter who finds a source on the street on his/her own *did not use* an information subsidy. However, a reporter that uses public affairs personnel to find a source *did use* a subsidy. Difficulty in examining this arises because some journalists receive subsidies (such as an interview with a source), but this information from the subsidy might not be directly quoted or referenced. As such, it would be nearly impossible through mere content analysis to determine if a subsidy was used. For this reason, we consulted with the public affairs practitioners managing the crisis for the actual subsidy and level of subsidy provided to each reporter for all of the individual items analyzed here.

Holladay (2007) suggested that analysis of media reports of official spokespeople alone is not a complete method for understanding crisis communication. Along those lines, the method employed here takes into account the "other" voices in the crisis (the victims, first responders) and a full accounting of the practitioners' information subsidy efforts.

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