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ScienceDirect
Public Relations Review 33 (2007) 40–48
Public Relations Review

President Bush's major post-Katrina speeches: Enhancing image repair discourse theory applied to the public sector

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Received 20 August 2006; received in revised form 13 November 2006; accepted 20 November 2006

Abstract

When Hurricane Katrina swept the Gulf Coast, President Bush's newly formed Department of Homeland Security received its first test and failed. In Katrina's aftermath, Bush not only had to manage one of the nation's worst natural disasters, but also had to quell political backlash about the federal government's response to Katrina. This study examines: (a) how Bush presented the federal response to Katrina in his speeches; (b) how Bush responded to the public's criticism in his speeches; and (c) how effective Bush's speeches were in repairing his tarnished image.

Keywords: Crisis communication; Disaster communication; Image repair discourse; Political communication; Hurricane Katrina

1. Introduction

When Hurricane Katrina swept the Gulf Coast in August 2005, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) received its first test and failed. Formed in 2003, DHS merged 22 agencies, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), into a single new department. Many feared this reorganization would direct funds from disaster planning and response to combating terrorism (Glasser & Grunwald, 2005). The federal government's inability to effectively prepare for and respond to Katrina confirmed these fears. Thus, in Katrina's aftermath, Bush not only had to manage one of the nation's worst natural disasters, but also had to quell political backlash about the federal government's inadequate planning and response.

This study examines: (a) how Bush presented the federal response to Katrina in his speeches; (b) how Bush responded to criticism of his administration in his speeches; and (c) how effective Bush's speeches were in repairing his post-Katrina tarnished image. In doing so, the study extends the application of image repair discourse theory applied to the pubic sector.

2. Background on Hurricane Katrina

Hurricane Katrina landed on August 29, 2005, resulting with the displacement of more than 500,000 families (White House, 2005). During the next six months, the federal government provided $64 billion in relief efforts. The final price tag for Katrina may be more than $200 billion (Stevenson & Hulse, 2005). In the days and weeks after

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doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2006.11.003

Katrina, the public and the media lambasted Bush for the federal government's inadequate response to Katrina. This criticism predominately focused on two issues: the federal government's poor disaster planning and slow and ineffective response.

Hurricane Katrina revealed that the federal government was not prepared for a major national disaster despite the billions of dollars poured into homeland security since September 11, 2001. Several factors led to this lack of preparation. First, the hyper-focus on terrorism diverted funds and attention from disaster planning. Since 9–11, FEMA awarded $11.3 billion to help first responders prepare for terrorist attacks (Margasak, 2005). First responders, however, believe training and grants provided for terrorism preparation do not help them prepare for disasters (Margasak, 2005). Second, the war in Iraq consumed state resources for disaster response. For example, almost one-third of the Louisiana National Guard was deployed to Iraq when Katrina landed ("Man-made disaster," 2005). Third, the federal government did not have an actionable national disaster plan. In 2004, the Bush administration introduced the National Response Plan to strengthen coordination among federal, state, and local emergency managers. Unfortunately, the 400 plus page plan caused more confusion than clarification (White House, 2006).

Because of its inadequate disaster planning, the federal government was unable to respond effectively to Katrina. For example, FEMA widely touted a debit card system that provided all evacuees with $2000 on debit cards. Only the families housed in the Houston Astrodome, however, received the debit cards (Yen, 2005). All other evacuees had to wait for mailed checks despite that many did not have permanent addresses. Also, FEMA did not plan for the eruption of looting and violence after Katrina despite that similar events occurred after 9–11 (Loven, 2005). Finally, the federal government lacked a plan for providing housing for evacuees (Hsu & Connolly, 2005). One month after Katrina landed, 200,000 families still lacked housing (Hsu & Connolly, 2005).

3. Background on presidential speeches

Presidential speeches are the most influential weapon in a president's public relations arsenal (Johnson, Wanta, & Bordeau, 2004; Schaefer, 1997). Speeches provide presidents with instantaneous access to the public and the media (Lammers, 1982) and allow presidents to discuss issues without interruption from political commentators and the media (Hiebert, 1981; Ragsdale, 1984). During crises, presidential speeches may be especially important in setting the tone of media coverage and influencing public opinion.

Crises are the ultimate political events, where politicians either become heroes or villains (Bolin & 't Hart, 2003; O'Brien, 1991; Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1997). For example, former President G.H. Bush's delayed response to 1992 Hurricane significantly contributed to his failed 1993 re-election campaign (Peacock & Ragsdale, 1998). Whether presidents emerge as heroes or villains largely depends on two factors: (a) how they respond to crises and (b) the venues they use to communicate with the public about crises. The most effective and visible way for presidents to communicate with the media and the public during crises is through speeches.

The impact of presidential speeches, however, is mitigated by several factors. First, events associated with presidential speeches may have a more lasting impact on public opinion than the speeches themselves (Simon & Ostrom, 1989). Second, events unrelated to presidential speeches may draw attention away from the speeches (Johnson et al., 2004). Finally, the media influence how the public evaluates presidential speeches (Schaefer, 1997).

4. Image repair discourse theory

Image repair discourse theory states that the primary goal of organizations facing crises is restoring or protecting their image (Benoit, 1995a, 1997; Fishman, 1999; Zhang & Benoit, 2004). The theory's two basic components are: (a) an organization is held responsible for an action by a key public and (b) this action is considered offensive by a key public. The theory outlines five broad categories of image repair strategies: denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification (Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Fishman, 1999; Metzler, 2001). Within these categories, several tactics can be employed. Table 1 displays a full list of the strategies and tactics.

Image repair discourse theory has been applied to case studies of corporations (Benoit, 1995b; Benoit & Czerwinski, 1997; Benoit & Dorries, 1996; Fishman, 1999; Metzler, 2001) and government entities (Benoit & Brinson, 1999; Benoit & McHale, 1999; Drumheller & Benoit, 2004; Zhang & Benoit, 2004). This study extends the application of image repair discourse to the public sector.