

## **WHEN THE SENDER IS THE MESSAGE: THE COMMUNICATION OF MARCELO REBELO DE SOUSA ABOUT THE 2017 FIRES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The theme of this article is the official crisis communication of the Portuguese Presidency (Presidência da República Portuguesa – PRP) during the forest fires that occurred in June and in October 2017, respectively known as the “tragedy of Pedrógão Grande” and the “October fires”. The fires of 2017 were the most harmful in Portuguese history and received wide coverage in the international media. That year, Portugal was the country that most suffered with fires, according to an European Union report (2018), accounting for about 90% of deaths caused by this type of fire in the entire area covered by the report. The main theoretical basis of this study is situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007). In SCCT, Coombs (2007) identified the variables involved in a crisis and presented the most appropriate response strategies to be applied to each crisis type. Through the discourse analysis method, we described and compared the Portuguese Presidency’s communication on the management of these two crises of similar origins (forest fires), only four months apart (June and October 2017). Our aim is to contribute to an understanding of the response strategies proposed by Coombs (2007) when applied to communication exclusively based on the public information model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). The research concluded that the PRP opted for the managing meaning strategy by adjusting information and predominance of the primary repair responses of the category “rebuild” and subcategory “compensation”, producing an appropriate response according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007). However, we note that the PRP crisis communication for the 2017 fires is a case in which the personal characteristics of the sender and the variables – crisis responsibility, crisis history and prior relationship reputation – were more relevant to the effectiveness of crisis communication than the messages themselves.

### **KEYWORDS**

crisis communication; public relations; press office; SCCT; Portugal fires

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## **QUANDO O EMISSOR É A MENSAGEM: A COMUNICAÇÃO DE MARCELO REBELO DE SOUSA NOS INCÊNDIOS DE 2017**

### **RESUMO**

Este artigo tem como tema a comunicação oficial de crise da Presidência da República Portuguesa (PRP) durante os incêndios florestais que aconteceram nos meses de junho e de outubro de 2017, conhecidos, respetivamente, como “tragédia de Pedrógão Grande” e “incêndios de outubro”. Os incêndios de 2017 foram os mais nefastos da história de Portugal e receberam

uma grande cobertura dos média internacionais. Naquele ano, Portugal foi o país que mais sofreu com os fogos, de acordo com o relatório da União Europeia (2018), tendo sido responsável por, aproximadamente, 90% das mortes causadas por incêndios. O principal fundamento teórico do estudo é a teoria situacional de comunicação de crise (TSCC) (Coombs, 2007). Na TSCC, Coombs (2007) identificou as variáveis envolvidas numa crise e apresentou as estratégias de resposta mais adequadas a serem aplicadas a cada tipo de crise. Por meio do método da análise do discurso, descrevemos e comparamos a comunicação da Presidência da República Portuguesa na gestão dessas duas crises de origens semelhantes (incêndios florestais) separadas por apenas quatro meses (junho e outubro de 2017). A nossa intenção é contribuir para a compreensão das estratégias de resposta propostas por Coombs (2007) quando aplicadas a uma comunicação exclusivamente baseada no modelo de informação pública (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). A investigação concluiu que a PRP optou pela estratégia de gestão do significado (Coombs, 2015) com informações de ajuste e predominância das respostas reparativas primárias da categoria “reconstrução” e subcategoria “compensação”, produzindo a resposta adequada segundo a TSCC (Coombs, 2007). No entanto, observamos que a comunicação de crise da PRP para os incêndios de 2017 é um caso em que as características pessoais do emissor e as variáveis – responsabilidade pela crise, histórico da crise e reputação relacional anterior – foram mais relevantes para a comunicação de crise do que as mensagens propriamente ditas.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

comunicação de crise; relações públicas; assessoria de imprensa; TSCC; incêndios em Portugal

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## INTRODUCTION

More than 100 people have died in fires in Portugal in less than four months. As much as the coldness of these times, full of numbers and political, economic and financial buzzwords, invite us to downplay or trivialize, these more than 100 dead will never leave my mind, as a huge burden on my conscience as well as on my presidential term. (Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, President of the Portuguese Republic, October 17, 2017)<sup>1</sup>

In 2017, the world was surprised by the extent of the fires and the number of casualties never before recorded in the history of Portugal: by October 31, the fire had burned down over 442.000 hectares and killed 115 people. Thus, the fires in Portugal were considered one of the five largest natural disasters of the year (European Union, 2018). The excerpt from the pronouncement of the President of the Portuguese Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, delivered on October 17, 2017 directly from Oliveira do Hospital, a county where the fires caused 12 deaths (Incêndios: Oliveira do Hospital homenageia vítimas mortais com memorial “15 de outubro”, 2017), expresses the seriousness of the tragedy that had struck the country and the emotion-laden manner in which the President conducted his response to the 2017 fires.

That year, Rebelo de Sousa organized his agenda to be close to the victims of those tragedies and conducted his political action with affection (Lopes & Espírito Santo, 2019). Regarding the government, in his speech, the President was “relentless in his criticism”,

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<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.presidencia.pt/?idc=10&idi=136887>

exercising his presidential function of “pushing the government towards certain decisions” (Lopes & Espírito Santo, 2019, pp. 253-254).

Forests cover 67% of Portuguese territory and, in addition to their environmental significance, they are economically very important for the country. Instituto da Conservação da Natureza e das Florestas (ICNF, 2019) data attributed 1,2% of gross domestic product (GDP), 10% of exports and 92.000 direct jobs to the forestry sector. Therefore, the occurrence of large forest fires is a major risk to the sector and harmful to the entire Portuguese population, and not a problem isolated to the affected areas.

In 2017, by October 31, “there were 214 fires in this category that burned 412.781 hectares of forested area, about 93% of the total area burned” (ICNF, 2017, p. 8) in Portugal. Between January 1 and October 31 that year, 442.418 hectares burned, more than five times the average area recorded in the previous ten years (2007-2016), which was 83.780 hectares (ICNF, 2017). In comparison to the previous ten years, 2017 had the highest number of occurrences and the largest burned area.

The 2017 fires were the most tragic in Portugal’s history and saw wide coverage in the international media (Imprensa de todo o mundo com os olhos em Portugal devido aos incêndios, 2017). The most significant events took place in June, with the fires that began on the 17<sup>th</sup>, known as the “Pedrógão Grande tragedy”, and in October, with the fires that began on the 15<sup>th</sup>, called as the “October fires”.

	BURNED AREA (HA)	FATAL VICTIMS	PEOPLE INJURED	HOMES DESTROYED	COMPANIES DESTROYED
Pedrógão Grande	51.944	66	253	500	50
October fires	223.901	49	70	1.500	500

Table 1: Impact of the 2017 fires in Portugal

Source: Drawn up by the authors based on ICNF (2017) and “Incêndios de Outubro fizeram 49 mortos e atingiram 1.500 casas” (2018)

As seen in Table 1, the October fires destroyed 223.901 hectares, while the fires in June ones were responsible for the devastation of 51.944 hectares. While the Pedrógão Grande tragedy was smaller in area, it was more serious than the October fires in terms of the number of deaths and injuries: 66 fatal victims (*versus* 49) and 253 injured (*versus* 70). When it comes to assets, the October fires’ numbers were greater than Pedrógão Grande: 1.500 homes (*versus* 500) and 500 companies (*versus* 50) were ruined by the fire.

A European Union report published in 2018 about the previous year’s forest fires in Europe, the Middle East and North America highlighted the severity of Portugal’s fires. The report revealed that Portugal was the country that most suffered from fires that year, with 21.006 occurrences and 115 fatal victims, of a total of 127 across the area covered by the report. Portugal ranked second for burned area (540.630 hectares), behind the Russian Federation (1,4 million hectares).

The study presented in this article emerges from the research initiated by the first author (Toniolo, 2019) during her master’s degree in Strategic Communication at the University of Beira Interior with the guidance of the second author.

## THE PRESIDENT AND THE 2017 FIRES

The President of the Portuguese Republic in 2017 and, therefore, at the time the tragic fires took place, was Full Professor of law Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, whose term of office commenced on March 9, 2016. Rebelo de Sousa is affiliated with the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and is the fifth democratically elected president since the April 1974 Revolution. Politically, President Rebelo de Sousa positions himself as center-right (Bial, 2019).

Before joining politics, Rebelo de Sousa was a communicator and commentator for decades, as well as a professor. From his experience with media – initially in newspapers, then on the radio and finally on television – the President gained huge popularity that raised him to the condition of “the president of affections” (Sebastião, 2018) and “the president-celebrity” (Couto, 2019), a label that he claimed did not bother him (Bial, 2019). For the population, the President of the Portuguese Republic is just “Marcelo”, someone “from home” who is called by his first name (Couto, 2019).

Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa is considered “a person of great intelligence, friendly, funny, emotional and a true political strategist” (Perfil: Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, o comentador que chegou a Belém, 2016, § 14). Since “bouncing through the glass” (Lopes & Botelho, 2019, p. 8), the President has fed his popularity by meeting with Portuguese people, often under the eyes of the media (Lopes & Botelho, 2019). This is how Rebelo de Sousa has been nurturing his legitimacy to inspire optimism and positivity in a population that elected him when the country had just emerged from a severe economic crisis marked by the harsh impositions of austerity.

The unpredictability attributed to Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa is related to his aversion to protocol. As he himself is a journalist – in the “old fashioned” sense – “he dominates, like few others, the rhythms of journalistic production” (Lopes & Botelho, 2019, p. 20) and the framing of television (Lopes & Botelho, 2019, p. 23). The President uses his influence over the media to reach the population. He is skilled in influencing the public agenda and, hence, often dismisses scripts and favors improvisation: “Marcelo can always surprise, especially when there are journalists by his side and the time for news programs is approaching” (Lopes & Botelho, 2019, p. 19).

It is not uncommon for him to speak directly to the press, he “uses the media as a kind of atrium of power, without the need for precise media advice” (Lopes & Botelho, 2019, p. 13) and “pays special attention to the reporters who accompany him” (p. 14). He does not use digital social media because he understands he has no control over it (Lopes & Botelho, 2019, p. 20).

Whether due to negligence in prevention, or inefficiency in firefighting efforts, the responsibility for the fires fell to the Portuguese state and its fundamental tasks. In this regard, in an interview with *Expresso* (Faria, 2017), President Rebelo de Sousa manifestly acknowledged the state’s responsibility for the tragedies, stating that “whenever citizens suffer serious damage because the state has not functioned as it should, it should compensate them, even if it is not possible to find a concrete entity responsible”.

## THE PRESIDENT IN THE FIELD

According to Lopes and Botelho (2019), it was past 9 p.m. when President Rebelo de Sousa hit the road, going against what the Republican National Guard (GNR) had advised him to do. When he arrived, he was received by the secretary of state for Internal Administration, Jorge Gomes, who, visibly moved, did not hold back tears before the press. “That emotional gesture would also contain the enormous fragility of a state that failed in its protection of the people”, highlight Lopes and Botelho (2019, p. 111). In just one day, the President went through nine counties, often driving his own car and, by choice, without the company of advisors.

However, when the strong fires came back on October 15 that same year, the President “didn’t immediately jump to the burning ground” (Lopes & Botelho, 2019, p. 70). He decided to cancel his agenda and wait for the prime minister, António Costa, to make a statement. With the recurrence of the tragedy, the press noticed a change in the President’s stance, observed by Lopes and Botelho (2019), which replaced affection with intervention. It was only on October 17, 2017, that he went to the region to “embrace the affected families and thank the firefighters for their work” (p. 71). That night, in Oliveira do Hospital, he delivered a tough speech directed at the government, demanding speed in forest reform and the implementation of effective firefighting measures.

The opinion poll known as the monthly barometer for *SIC/Expresso*, carried out by the Instituto Eurosondagem, showed the popularity of President Rebelo de Sousa throughout 2017<sup>2</sup>. Notwithstanding the tragedies of international repercussion that occurred that year as a result of the fires, the President was rated positively by at least 69% of the population (March 2017, reaching 72% in September 2017). In October 2017, the President obtained the lowest negative assessment rate in 12 months: 7,1% (reaching 10,3% in September 2017).

	MAY	JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER
<b>Positive</b>	69%	70%	70,7%	71%	72%	69,1%	70%
<b>Neutral</b>	14,4%	12,9%	12,4%	12,9%	11,7%	17,4%	15,8%
<b>Negative</b>	8,5%	9,4%	9,8%	9,5%	10,3%	7,1%	7,5%
<b>Not answered</b>	8,1%	7,7%	7,1%	6,6%	6,0%	6,4%	6,7%

Table 2: President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa’s popularity in 2017 (between May and November)

Source: Drawn up by the authors from Barómetro Eurosondagem for *SIC/Expresso*

## GOVERNMENTAL PUBLIC RELATIONS

By government communication, we mean “the information flows and relationship patterns involving the executive and society” (Duarte, 2011, p. 5). Canel (2018) argue that

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.eurosondagem.pt/inform/barometro%20orgaos%20poder.htm#PresidenteRepublica>

governmental communication can have both political and civic ends. To do so, it uses tools and strategies to influence its audiences, build reputation, interact and gain citizen support.

Regarding the public relations model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) that governmental communication should follow, Canel (2010) argues that symmetric models are those able to obtain the best results. Despite being criticized for being utopian and idealizing the role of public relations in society, we agree that because of its democratic character and the search for a balance between public institutions and the public interest, the bidirectional symmetric model is the most appropriate for communication in public administration (Grunig, Grunig & Dozier, 2002). However, research conducted by Grunig and Jaatinen (1999) concluded that the model that predominates in the public sector is public information. “The public information model is a one-way model that emphasises the dissemination of accurate information to the general population, which seldom uses research and whose practitioners usually are journalists” (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999, p. 219).

Valentini’s research (2013) confirmed that the public information model is the most common in the governmental sphere, but not the only one. Although all models can be identified, the press agent and bidirectional symmetric models were the ones that obtained the lowest frequencies in his study.

We know that public relations activity is associated with the management of communication between an organization and its publics, and that the duties of its professionals are to manage, plan and execute the communication of organizations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Public relations also have the social function to watch over the harmony between the discourse and the practice of organizations. This role is especially important when it comes to government communication, defends Bowen (2012).

Governmental public relations, according to Lee (2012), are a tool that qualifies public administration, since, in democratic societies, it is their duty to be close to citizens, informing them and engaging them in participation. In Sommerfeldt’s (2013) notion, public relations are necessary to ensure the involvement of relevant organizations in discussions on matters of public interest in the public sphere, thereby ensuring the health of democratic institutions and providing an informed public opinion.

Lee (2012) organizes the functions of government public relations into three categories: democratic, pragmatic, and political functions. Among the mandatory democratic functions, Lee (2012) highlights those that are linked to transparency: (a) relationship with the media, including responses to questions, inquiries and other requests; (b) accountability in the form of reports or other methods which help keep citizens informed; (c) the ability to respond to the public as citizens.

However, as L’Etang (2009) points out, the power to influence has been used by some governments to filter and distort information. Some critics have denounced that governmental communication is a mere manipulation strategy marked by a dissociation

between image and reality or between discourse and action (Canel, 2010), to the benefit of governments. Because media relations are one of the main roles of government public relations (Canel, 2018; Lee, 2012), their lack of transparency can reinforce distrust of the professional ethics of public relations.

The goals of the press office are to inform, communicate and influence public opinion about a particular organization, so persuasion is a concept intrinsic to the activity. The press office consists of managing the relationships of an organization with the press in order to influence the process of producing information with news standards for the dissemination, by sources, of events (Ribeiro, 2014). In Ribeiro's words, the activity encompasses journalism and public relations skills, being "totally impregnated with persuasion and propaganda" (2014, p. 71).

In the context of public administration, the press officer is responsible for expressing the organization's information policy through techniques that allow the convergence of interests: "the institution is interested in receiving good coverage and the media are interested in first-hand information" (Canel, 2010, p. 252).

In crisis management, the press office stands out as the activity responsible for informing the public about the organization's attitudes to solve the problem and minimize its impacts. According to Caetano, Vasconcelos and Vasconcelos (2006), the media is "one of the most difficult audiences" (p. 42) for crisis communication because of its influence on shaping public opinion. In line with these claims, Lampreia (2007) notes that "the way the media tell the 'story of the crisis'" (p. 81) is the best indicator of the effectiveness of crisis communication.

Among the most widely used press office techniques is the press release, content prepared in a journalistic style and sent to the media for publication. It is common for the press release to be published in the news section of the organization's website, a space that functions as a content repository. The success of a press release depends on its news value, because "it accepts entirely one of the most important news-values: public interest" (Ribeiro, 2014, p. 76).

In addition to press releases, crisis management also includes press conferences, statements, the preparation of spokespersons and the fulfillment of requests for press clarifications among the functions of the press office.

### **SITUATIONAL CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY (SCCT)**

We understand crisis as "an untimely but predictable event that has actual or potential consequences for stakeholder's interests as well as the reputation of the organization suffering the crisis" (Heath & Millar, 2004, p. 2). Crisis communication, according to Coombs (2010, p. 20), "revolves around collecting information about crisis risks, making decisions about how to manage potential crisis, and training people who will be involved in the crisis management process".

In relation to crisis communication strategies, advisory services can develop information management or meaning management, according to Coombs (2015). The former involves the mere dissemination of information related to the crisis, while the latter covers efforts to influence public perceptions. For Coombs (2015), crisis management should always adopt the meaning management strategy in its communication: “the discussion of crisis response strategies must consider the effects the crisis response strategies are intended to have upon stakeholders’ perceptions of the crisis situation” (Coombs, 2015, p. 142).

Meaning management tends to be a more effective strategy than information management as it considers variables that influence and reflect efforts to manage the meanings of the crisis. As Coombs states (2015, p. 141), to “communicate during a crisis does not mean you necessarily make the situation better”, the response to the crisis needs to be able to reduce its effects. It is up to the press office to assist in identifying the type of crisis in which the organization is involved and to choose the appropriate response strategy. To facilitate this process, Coombs (2007) has created a set of guidelines framed in situational crisis communication theory (SCCT).

The crisis response strategies can be “divided into three categories: instructing information, adjusting information, and reputation asset information” (Coombs, 2015, p. 142). *Instructing information* helps those involved to protect themselves physically during a crisis, as it contains a set of guidelines to ensure public safety. *Adjusting information* aims to reduce ambiguity over the crisis and aim to minimize its psychological effects. Finally, *reputation asset information* seeks to reduce the negative effects of the crisis on the organization’s image. The crisis communication model proposed in SCCT, therefore, can only be applied when the necessary responses to the physical and psychological protection of the individuals affected by the crisis have already been given.

According to Coombs (2007), reputations are based on “how stakeholders evaluate an organization’s ability to meet their expectations for treating stakeholders” (p.164). Thus, reputation formation relies on information that stakeholders receive about an organization, how it interacts and communicates directly or indirectly. Media-mediated information is considered as an indirect form of communication or second-hand information. Stakeholders find out about crises mostly through the news, but also because of social media (Coombs, 2007).

Coombs’ SCCT (2007) has as its starting point the attribution of responsibility for the crisis. If an organization is held accountable, the assignment is negative, the stakeholder feeling is anger, and the organization’s reputation is affected. If an organization is not held responsible for the crisis, the assignment is positive and the feeling evoked is that of sympathy. The media play a central role in attributing responsibility for a crisis and, consequently, in the emotion generated about an organization. After all, the press’ approach to a crisis influences public opinion.

In addition to initial crisis responsibility, two other variables can affect organizational reputation and stakeholder behavior: (1) crisis history – if it has experienced similar



crisis and (2) prior relational reputation – stakeholder management of previous crisis (Coombs, 2007, pp. 166-167).

Correctly identifying the type of crisis by determining the initial responsibility is the first step towards effective management of crisis communication. The measure allows us to anticipate the intensity of the threat to the reputation that the stakeholders will assign to the organization. The diagnosis of the crisis situation continues with an evaluation of the other two variables – crisis history and previous relational reputation – which can intensify or reduce threat levels.

The next step involves crisis response strategies. Coombs (2015) explains that “crisis response strategies are used to repair the reputation, reduce negative effects and prevent negative behavioral intentions” (p. 170). Based on previous research, Coombs (2015) has established a list of reparative response strategies that make up SCCT and are divided into two groups: primary responses and secondary or complementary responses.

PRIMARY RESPONSES		
<b>Deny</b>	Attack the accuser	The crisis manager confronts the person or group that claims something is wrong with the organization
	Denial	The crisis manager says there is no crisis
	Scapegoat	The crisis manager blames some person or group outside the organization for the crisis
<b>Diminish</b>	Excuse	The crisis manager minimizes organizational responsibility by denying intent to cause damage and/or by claiming inability to control the events that triggered the crisis
	Justification	The crisis manager minimizes the perceived damage caused by the crisis
<b>Rebuild</b>	Compensation	The crisis manager offers money or other gifts to the victims
	Apology	The crisis manager indicates that the organization takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks for forgiveness from the victims
SECONDARY RESPONSES		
<b>Bolstering</b>	Reminder	The crisis manager informs interested parties about the organization's past good work
	Ingratiation	The crisis manager praises the stakeholders and/or remembers the good work done in the past by the organization
	Victimage	The crisis manager reminds the interested parties that the organization is also a victim of the crisis

Table 3: SCCT'S reparative response to crisis strategies  
 Source: Drawn up by the authors based on Coombs (2007)

According to SCCT, the appropriate choice of reparative strategy response to the crisis, summarized in the above table, can protect the organization's reputation. Briefly: deny strategies attempt to remove any connection between the organization and the crisis. (...) The diminish crisis response strategies argue that a crisis is not as bad as people think (...). Rebuild strategies are the main avenue for generating new reputational assets. (...) All bolstering strategies are best used as supplements to the three primary strategies and adjusting information. (Coombs, 2007, pp. 171-172)

Although SCCT was developed for crisis management in the private sector, we found it relevant to apply the model to public administration and government. One example is Adkins’s research (2010) on the disaster caused by hurricane Katrina in the New Orleans region in 2005. It was a multilevel crisis involving management and communication of at least five government agencies, including the administration of President George W. Bush. Also in our study, we intend to analyze how the Presidency of the Portuguese Republic managed the communication of the June and October fires crisis, according to the criteria established by SCCT.

## METHODS

The research assumes that, in a digital communication scenario in which the roles of sender and receiver mix, only the press office – public information model – is an insufficient public relations strategy to produce adequate responses to any kind of crisis. The main objective of the research is, therefore, to find whether the communication strategy adopted by the Portuguese Presidency (Presidência da República Portuguesa, PRP) – its model and its discourses – for communication during the 2017 fires produced the appropriate response according to SCCT (Coombs, 2007). We opted for the qualitative method of discourse analysis (Daymon & Holloway, 2011) in order to examine the rhetorical aspects of the language used by the PRP from the set of guidelines proposed by Coombs (2007) and instrumented in the SCCT model.

The data gathering was by searching using the tool available on the PRP website with the keyword “incêndios” (fires) covering the “News”, “Interventions”, “Messages” and “President of the Republic” categories. We gathered all the content available for 14 days from the outbreak dates of the crisis situations under review (Pedrógão Grande tragedy June 17-30, 2017; October fires October 15-28, 2017).

In Table 4 we consolidate the corpus of this investigation and assign each of the eight pieces of content a letter (A-H) to make it easier to identify them in the discussion of the results.

DATA	CONTENT	TITLE	SPEECH
June 18, 2017	Video speech	Declaração do Presidente da República a propósito da tragédia de Pedrógão Grande (Statement by the President of the Republic regarding the Pedrógão Grande tragedy)	A
June 21, 2017	Press release	Presidente da República associa-se a minuto de silêncio em memória das vítimas (President of the Republic joins the minute’s silence in memory of the victims)	B
June 27, 2017	Press release	Concerto solidário “Juntos por Todos” (Solidarity concert “Juntos por Todos”)	C
October 15, 2017	Press release	Presidente da República acompanha evolução dos incêndios (President of the Republic follows the development of the fires)	D
October 16, 2017	Press release	Presidente da República reafirma urgência de agir (President of the Republic reaffirms urgency to act)	E

October 17, 2017	Press release	Presidente da República em Oliveira do Hospital (President of the Republic at Oliveira do Hospital)	F
October 17, 2017	Video speech	Declaração do Presidente da República ao país (Statement by the President of the Republic to the country)	G
October 23, 2017	Press release	Visitas do Presidente da República aos concelhos afetados pelos incêndios (Visit by the President of the Republic to the counties affected by the fires)	H

Table 4: *Corpus* summary table

## PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

According to SCCT (Coombs, 2007), the crisis triggered by the Pedrógão Grande tragedy in relation to the PRP falls into the “victimage” category, the “natural disaster” subcategory. Although it is common for forest fires to occur every summer in Portugal, due to the size of these fires and a number of victims never before recorded in the country’s history, the Portuguese population was surprised. Since 2003, Portugal had been able to control the occurrence of large forest fires, which led us to attribute the negative response to the existence of a similar history of crisis. These conditions contributed to our understanding that the PRP was also a victim of the Pedrógão Grande tragedy.

Following this perception, we found that the PRP never took on responsibility for the Pedrógão Grande tragedy, nor did the population consider that the President could have taken steps to prevent it. Thus, the Pedrógão Grande tragedy caused minimal attribution of responsibility and moderate threat to the PRP’s reputation, in line with what Coombs (2007) outlined.

The October fires, in relation to the PRP, fall into the category of “accidental crisis”. There was no intentionality, but inefficiency in the PRP in actions that could have prevented a repeat of the Pedrógão Grande tragedy. As a subcategory, the most appropriate framework is “challenge”. In the case of the October fires – and unlike what happened with the Pedrógão Grande tragedy – responsibility did lie with the PRP, but, by sharing responsibility for the crisis with the government, the potential impact on the PRP’s reputation is moderate. According to Coombs (2007), crises of this kind also impact minimal attributions of responsibility and moderate reputational threat.

That the PRP accepted responsibility for the crisis reinforces our findings, since this corroborates the population’s view that the state is one of the culprits (Faria, 2017). The history of similar forest fires in Portugal, notably the Pedrógão Grande tragedy, which occurred just four months earlier, contributed to the framing of the crisis in the challenge subcategory.

Regarding the crisis response strategy, both in the Pedrógão Grande tragedy and the October fires, the PRP adopted meaning management (Coombs, 2015). The strategy tends to be more efficient in reducing the effects of the crisis, as it acts on stakeholders’ perceptions. Coupled with an adjustment information strategy, it reflects efforts to

manage the meanings of the crisis and is able to reduce ambiguity and minimize the psychological effects caused for those involved (Coombs, 2007). The positive rating of the PRP, always above 69% between May and November 2017, according to data from the Barómetro Eurosondagem for *SIC/Expresso*, indicates a positive relationship reputation of the PRP with the Portuguese population<sup>3</sup>.

#### **CRISIS COMMUNICATION DURING THE PEDRÓGÃO GRANDE TRAGEDY**

President Rebelo de Sousa's first official statement regarding the Pedrógão Grande tragedy took place on June 18 at Belém Palace in Lisbon, the President's official residence<sup>4</sup>. The speech, lasting three minutes and 35 seconds, was made available in video format on the PRP website.

President Rebelo de Sousa began speech A by stating that he had just decreed national mourning for three days in solidarity with the relatives of the victims of the Pedrógão Grande tragedy, a message that, according to Coombs (2007), falls in the "rebuild" primary response category, "compensation" subcategory. In the speech, the President expressed immeasurable pain and solidarity for the dozens of deaths and called the event "an almost unprecedented tragedy in the history of democratic Portugal".

Despite the intense pain, he noted the need to keep spirits up to continue fighting the fires in the region. He particularly thanked the firefighters, the Civil Protection Authority, the National Institute of Medical Emergency of Portugal (Inem), the Republican National Guard (GNR), the Judiciary Police, the Armed Forces, local authorities, health and social structures, and the anonymous people for their commitment and also offered support (secondary response bolstering, subcategory ingratiation). The President then mentioned the messages of support he had received from Pope Francis, heads of state and other international authorities, and said that he would go to the area the following day.

At his speech, President Rebelo de Sousa expressed the feelings of doubt, anguish and injustice to the victims, mostly because the fires directly affected the least privileged Portuguese people. He called it one of the "most difficult moments in our life as a nation" and called for unity: "we are one for Portugal" (secondary response "bolstering", subcategory "victimage").

Thus, we can say that the speech A response is connected to the "rebuild" primary category, "compensation" subcategory. Although Coombs (2007) has defined this subcategory as material offer, it is the one that best qualifies the response given by the PRP, since the President made available the resource within reach at that time: solidarity. When expressing gratitude to those involved in firefighting, the message also took over, in the background, characteristics of the bolstering secondary response category, ingratiation subcategory. The association of "bolstering" second category response, "victimage

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.eurosondagem.pt/inform/barometro%20orgaos%20opoder.htm#PresidenteRepublica>

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.presidencia.pt/?idc=10&idi=131998>

“subcategory is due to use of the personal pronoun “we” in the last sentences of the speech.

The second official message from the PRP about the Pedrógão Grande tragedy was not issued until the 21<sup>st</sup>. With a three-line press release (speech B), the press office states that the President “joins the expression of grief voted on by Assembly of the Republic and will observe a minute’s silence (...), in Pedrógão Grande, in memory of the victims”. The last press release about the Pedrógão Grande tragedy of the series analyzed was published on the 27<sup>th</sup> (speech C)<sup>6</sup>. Short (only seven lines), the press release provided information about the presence of President Rebelo de Sousa at the “solidarity concert honoring the victims of the Pedrógão Grande fire”. The President’s offer of solidarity to the victims, devoting a minute’s silence to their memory and his presence at the concert “Juntos por Todos” (Together for All) led us to frame the messages of the 21<sup>st</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> in the “rebuild” category, “compensation” subcategory (Coombs, 2007).

### **CRISIS COMMUNICATION DURING THE OCTOBER FIRES**

In the first press release (four lines) published shortly after the October fires broke out on the 15<sup>th</sup>, President Rebelo de Sousa, through his press office, expressed “solidarity with the people and the local authorities” (speech D)<sup>7</sup>. President Rebelo de Sousa also thanked the firefighters and civil protection structures that acted in the fight against fires and used the word “grief” to refer to the relatives of the victims. In a short message, the President reported that he had followed the events and expressed dismay. Because of these aspects, we fit the response into the “rebuild” primary category, “compensation” subcategory.

The press release issued by the PRP the day after (16<sup>th</sup>) the start<sup>8</sup> of the October fires followed the strategy of primary crisis response, “rebuild” category, “compensation” subcategory (nine lines). The President expressed urgency in stabilizing the fires and announced the cancellation of the week’s agenda to “follow the fire situation across the mainland” (speech E)<sup>9</sup>. Once again, he offered his physical presence to the affected areas, so we saw a subtle transition in tone from dismay to scrutiny when President Rebelo de Sousa announced that he was awaiting an assessment of the tragedy and called for “a change of point of view translated into acts rather than words”. We understand that the President of the Republic was referring, even if not expressly, to the government when demanding action, which is pertinent to his duties as head of state.

Even on the 17<sup>th</sup>, the PRP’s press office reported the President’s trip to Oliveira do Hospital, “one of the counties with the most fatal victims following last Sunday’s forest

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.presidencia.pt/?idc=10&idi=132011>

<sup>6</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.presidencia.pt/?idc=10&idi=132039>

<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.presidencia.pt/?idc=10&idi=136854>

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.presidencia.pt/?idc=10&idi=136884>

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.presidencia.pt/?idc=10&idi=136887>

fires” (speech F)<sup>10</sup>. The five-line press release announced a live speech by President Rebelo de Sousa in the evening. The message was consistent with the previous ones in terms of response category and subcategory (“rebuild”, “compensation”), as it demonstrated the President’s willingness to be close to the victims and the prudence to closely follow the consequences of the tragedy and only then to speak.

President Rebelo de Sousa started a speech (duration 11 minutes and 35 seconds) full of emotion. He began by positioning himself as a Portuguese citizen. In the excerpt “the President of the Republic is above all a person. A person who will forever retain in his memory images such as the image of Pedrógão” (speech G)<sup>11</sup>, he identified himself as a “citizen of flesh and blood”. He did not, however, victimize himself or the PRP institution, but expressed empathy with the local authorities, the people and the fire brigade, among others that were cited following the speech, referring to their efforts to save lives and property.

The President then alluded to the number of fire deaths of the year (over 100 deaths in four months in Portugal) and stressed that the coldness of the numbers could not “minimize or trivialize” the tragedy. When the President announced that “these more than 100 dead will never leave my mind, as a huge burden on my conscience as well as on my presidential term”, he acknowledged responsibility for the crisis; the primary response was slanted towards the subcategory “apology”, “rebuild” category. The President repeated the mention of 100 deaths four times throughout his speech.

President Rebelo de Sousa’s speech (speech G) continued with an admission of relative responsibility (primary response category “diminish”, subcategory “excuse”). By saying that he was “elected to unconditionally serve the Portuguese people, to fulfill and enforce a Constitution that intends to guarantee the confidence of the citizens”, he placed his responsibility within the scope of his duties as head of state. From this point on, Rebelo de Sousa’s speech became more emphatic, listing the elements that weakened the population and structures in the face of the tragedies caused by the fires in Portugal in 2017.

The President pointed out the “decades of disorder or failure to comply with the law”, “the inadequacy of structures or people in the face of weather conditions, the size and nature of fires so different from those they were used to”, the delay in publishing the report of the parliamentary committee that investigated the Pedrógão Grande tragedy, “the growing denunciation of mayors regarding possibly unpunished crimes at the origin of the fires” and the “powerlessness of society and the public authorities in the face of such a confluence of disasters”, thus including other entities in those responsible for the crisis.

The final part of President Rebelo de Sousa’s speech tried to provide “a quick and convincing answer” and demanded the same from the government. At that time, the

<sup>10</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.presidencia.pt/?idc=10&idi=136886>

<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.presidencia.pt/?idc=10&idi=136935>

PRP's official crisis communication took on a timely approach to the information management strategy by announcing measures that could and should be taken by the President of the Republic and, in particular, by demanding from the government certain actions, including a guarantee of compensation to victims.

In addition, he challenged the Assembly of the Republic to establish whether or not to “keep the government in office”, in accordance with the sovereign body's understanding of the government's ability under prime minister António Costa to carry out “indispensable and unavoidable” actions.

To conclude, the President apologized to the victims of the fires, when the response to the crisis therefore also took on the characteristics of “rebuild”, “apology”. The last press release (six lines) on the October fires of the series analyzed was published on the 23<sup>rd</sup> (speech H) and reported on President Rebelo de Sousa's visits to the municipalities hit by the fires. The tone of regret and the announcement of more visits cause the announcement to fall into the “rebuild” category, “compensation” subcategory.

The crisis generated by the Pedrógão Grande tragedy, when analyzed from a SCCT perspective (Coombs, 2007), placed the PRP in the position of victim. The June 2017 fires were considered a natural disaster, the result of catastrophic confluence of a range of environmental and human factors. The October fires, in turn, generated a crisis classified as accidental and constituted a challenge to be overcome by the Portuguese state together with society. Regarding Pedrógão Grande, the PRP was not implicated in the crisis, as explained in the previous section. However, the same cannot be said about the October fires. The PRP accepted responsibility for the crisis, just as the population blamed it for the tragedy that occurred.

In addition to the initial attribution of responsibility for the crisis, with regard to the variables, what distinguished the Pedrógão Grande tragedy from the October fires was the history of the crisis. While the first crisis was perceived as a natural disaster, the occurrence of a similar crisis within just four months showed how inefficient the Portuguese authorities were in taking steps to avert a new tragedy. Thus, the crisis history variable added elements to the October fires to make it a crisis with a strong potential for negative impact on President Rebelo de Sousa's reputation.

However, the population realized that the responsibility was not exclusive to the PRP, but shared with the government and other actors, which meant that the crisis had a weak level of responsibility for the PRP regarding both the Pedrógão Grande tragedy and the October fires. The moderate level of reputational threat was achieved thanks to the President's previous satisfactory relational reputation, as shown in the Barómetro Eurosondagem data (see table 2), which indicated a positive rating always above 69% between May and November 2017<sup>12</sup>.

From the analysis of the official PRP communication from June 17 to 30 and October 15 to 28, 2017, for the crises known as the Pedrógão Grande tragedy and October fires,

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<sup>12</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.eurosondagem.pt/inform/barometro%20orgaos%20poder.htm#PresidenteRepublica>

we conclude that the PRP opted for the meaning management strategy of adjustment information and predominance of the primary reparative responses of the rebuild category and subcategory compensation as management strategies. And, given the results of the Barómetro Eurosondagem for *SIC/Expresso*, we can say that the PRP's crisis communication during the 2017 fires was efficient in preserving the organization's reputation.

## CONCLUSION

The seriousness of the consequences caused by the fires in Portugal makes this a subject of public interest to be studied by the various fields of science. Regarding communication, we were interested in investigating the strategies, responses and impact of the crisis on organizational reputation, more specifically on the Presidency of the Portuguese Republic (PRP), personified by Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. The case of President Rebelo de Sousa demonstrated that choices may derive from the personal characteristics of the main interlocutor, such as the President's mastery of journalistic production and his lack of confidence in digital media.

In our case study, we found that the 2017 fires in Portugal generated a serious crisis with international repercussions. Images of Portuguese firefighters trying to contain the fire, the desperation of the victims' relatives and the totally charred trees spread around the world, placing the country and its authorities in the spotlight.

Consistent with the communication policy implemented since the inauguration of President Rebelo de Sousa, the 2017 fire crisis also saw the PRP use the press to get its messages to the population. Although he had a complete press office structure at his disposal, the President preferred to relate directly with journalists, often surprising his aides (Lopes & Botelho, 2019). The small number of messages produced by the press office in our corpus of analysis (three and five messages produced in the two weeks following the outbreaks of the Pedrógão Grande tragedy and the October fires, respectively) confirms the President's predilection for communication without intermediaries.

The PRP's crisis reporting during the 2017 fires is a case in which the variables – crisis responsibility, crisis history, and previous relational reputation – were more relevant than the actual messages themselves. This conclusion is related to President Rebelo de Sousa's personality, known as the “president-celebrity” and the “president of affections” due to the proximity that he has established with the Portuguese people. But it is also owed to “press support for presidential initiatives” (Lopes & Espírito Santo, 2019, p. 255) that “reinforces presidential communication strategy” (Lopes & Espírito Santo, 2019, p. 243).

From the analysis of the PRP's official communication during the 2017 fires according to SCCT parameters (Coombs, 2007), we infer that the PRP opted to send messages identified as adjustment information with the predominance of the rebuild primary category, compensation subcategory (Coombs, 2007). The information classes provided by



Coombs (2007) are not mutually exclusive, so it is possible to find instructing, adjusting and reputational asset information in the same answer. Similarly, a reparative response strategy may have a predominance of adjusting information.

Finally, we emphasize that the case study showed that the PRP's adherence to the public information model did not impair the efficiency of its communication and that the press office is a fundamental public relations strategy in crisis communication. However, when opting for press relations as the only strategy, one needs to be aware that results may be conditional on the crisis variables as well as the communicative ability of the key interlocutor.

For public relations professionals responsible for the strategic communication of an organization, whether public or private, we indicate that it is essential to include a plan that covers all phases of crisis communication – pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis. Crisis communication planning allows public relations to act pre-emptively and prepare the organization to respond appropriately to each situation. In addition to press relations, professionals should include, whenever possible, other strategies to ensure communication that promotes dialogue and the quality of relationships between an organization and its stakeholders.

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