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Crisis Communication in the Public Sector: Influences on Stakeholders' Experience of Psychological Effects as U.S.-Russia Tensions Rise

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Abstract

As war in Ukraine rages on and the U.S.-Russia relationship becomes increasingly hostile, the need to better understand public sector communication in times of international crisis is once again rising. For years, the public and private sectors have been treated largely the same in crisis communication research and practice. In the context of international crisis, specifically rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia, this study looks at where these differences lie and what that might mean for future research and practice.

In contribution to this broader topic, this study looks at the influence of domestic stakeholders' perceptions of the Biden Administration's adapting information about the crisis on their experience of psychological effects, anger and anxiety. It was also hypothesized that involvement and political ideology would have moderating effects on this relationship. Through a survey of 644 U.S. citizens and residents, adapting information was shown to have a strong positive correlation with psychological effects. The moderation was insignificant; however, both political ideology and involvement correlated significantly to psychological effects. Findings support treating public and private sector organizations differently in research and practice. Further research is suggested for defining more differences and determining best practices for public sector crisis communication.

Keywords: Adapting information, psychological effects, international crisis, public sector, involvement, political ideology, crisis communication

CRISIS COMMUNICATION IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR: INFLUENCES ON STAKEHOLDERS' EXPERIENCE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS AS U.S.-RUSSIA TENSIONS RISE

By

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Contents

Introduction

In late February, Russia launched a military invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent war has dominated public attention around the world. In December of 2021, Russia's foreign ministry demanded "the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to cease any military activity in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, to commit against further NATO expansion toward Russia, and to prevent Ukraine from joining NATO in the future," and state leaders rejected these demands (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022, para. 2). The effects of this conflict are nuanced and many, but one in particular is the increasingly hostile relationship between the United States and Russia.

These international tensions can be considered a crisis, requiring effective crisis communication. Much crisis communication scholarship focuses on the private sector and looks at the topic from a public relations perspective (Choi & Lin, 2009; Coombs, 2015; Lee, Lu, & Jin, 2021). An increasing amount of literature, however, explores how these theories and models intersect with or could be adapted for the public sector (Arcila-Calderón et al, 2021; Kim & Liu, 2012; Liu & Horsley, 2007).

As the world becomes increasingly globalized and technology develops, transcending geographic barriers and enabling greater access to information, the need to understand how this information impacts stakeholder emotions is becoming increasingly important in the context of international affairs and public sector communication. This study examines if and how adapting information, political ideology, and crisis involvement influence the psychological effects of the crisis on stakeholders. As war in Ukraine carries on, tensions between the U.S. and Russia continue to escalate. Looking at these tensions as an international crisis, this study specifically focuses on domestic stakeholders' — U.S. citizens' and residents' — perceptions of the Joe

Biden Administration's communication and the psychological effects they experience from this situation.

The variable of adapting information and psychological effects of crises come from the situational crisis communication theory (SCCT), developed by Timothy Coombs (2007). SCCT focuses on organizational reputation management during a crisis. While the reputational benefits of effective crisis communication outlined in SCCT relate primarily to the private sector, they can also be valuable in achieving public sector communication objectives as well. Damage to an organization's reputation can change how stakeholders interact with that organization (Coombs, 2007, para. 6). For the White House in this crisis situation — U.S. tension with Russia and the war in Ukraine — this could mean a loss in support for policy decisions.

Literature Review

Background of U.S.-Russia Relations

The U.S.-Russia relationship is both complicated and lengthy, dating back to 1803 when Russia formally recognized the United States. Diplomatic relations were officially established in 1809 and interrupted following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Normal diplomatic relations were not reestablished until 1933 (Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2021, para. 1). The two nations fought together in World War II, but shortly thereafter Soviet expansion into Eastern Europe led to U.S. fear of a Soviet-controlled world (HISTORY, 2022). Thus began the multi-decade power struggle known as the Cold War, which came to define their contemporary relationship (HISTORY, 2022). Each country raced to be number one in weapons production, space exploration, ideological influence, and other strategic areas. In 1983, U.S. President Ronald Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire" in a public address (Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2021). In 1991, the U.S. recognized the Russian

Federation as the successor to the Soviet Union and the two established diplomatic relations once again (Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 2021). The Cold War, however, had left a lasting impact.

Despite being tumultuous and on-again-off-again, the countries' relationship is "among the most critical bilateral relationships in the world," with the two nations sharing many interests including nuclear nonproliferation, climate change combattance, and space exploration (Center for Strategic and International Studies, n.d., para. 1). The U.S. and Russia are both the key to success and the greatest hurdle in each other's efforts toward these goals.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 sparked rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia as the U.S. has long been a proponent of Ukrainian independence and an ally in that endeavor. In this post-Cold War context, Hartnett (2022) argues that "Putin is making an ill-conceived gambit to reclaim his nation's stature as an imperial power and assert Russia's prestige, authority and will on the world stage," (para. 2).

Shortly following the invasion, President Biden imposed severe sanctions on top Kremlin officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin. The U.S. has also provided Ukraine with military assistance in support of its efforts to fend off Russian troops (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Putin has since threatened use of nuclear weapons, to which White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan warned, "if Russia crosses this line, there will be catastrophic consequences for Russia," (Collinson, 2022, para. 5). National security will undoubtedly continue to be a top concern for both nations' presidents.

U.S. Strategic Communication on National Security Issues

The need for the U.S. Government to employ effective strategic communication in the context of national security was amplified shortly after the attacks on September 11th, 2001, as a

means for the U.S. government to achieve credibility and, furthermore, freedom of action (Guerrero-Castro, 2013). Objectives of the government's strategic communication are similar to private sector objectives, like building mutual understanding with audiences. Entities of the government, which have different fundamental purposes, surely have slightly different objectives. For the White House, "influencing audiences to support the objectives of the communicator" (Stavridis, 2007, p. 4), can be understood as garnering support for policy decisions.

Important to note also, are the types of government stakeholders. "Stakeholders" refers to "any group that can affect or be affected by the behavior of an organization," (Coombs, 2007, para. 3). Stakeholders for the government include foreign publics, like state actors, and domestic publics (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). This study focuses on domestic stakeholders' — U.S. citizens' and residents' — perceptions of government communication. When it comes to garnering support for policy, the power of domestic stakeholders to influence others and vote out representatives who do not represent their will makes them an important group with whom to communicate.

As opposed to private sector industries, some scholars find that government strategic communication lags behind, particularly in professional development, which includes formal norms and guidelines like codes of ethics (Liu & Horsley, 2007). Additionally, the government has a generally poor public perception and "the negative connotations of the term *propaganda* and the derogatory use of *spin* often make the public cynical about the intentions of government communications" (p. 380). Still, there is some tangible recognition of ethical considerations for government strategic communication. Stavridis (2007) explicitly acknowledges truthfulness and timeliness. Guerrero-Castro (2013) adds to this the peacekeeping and informative functions of

strategic communication in national security contexts. Nevertheless, public perception and trust continues to be an issue with which the U.S. government must contend (Fitzgerald, 2022; Pew Research, 2022, June 6).

Public Sector Communication and Political Ideology

Another distinguishing factor of government communication that Liu and Horsley (2007) identify is politics. While private sector organizations are influenced and affected by politics to varied extents, politics are "the essence" of the public sector (p. 378). At any given time, the White House and its communication is led by a particular political party with its own political ideology and goals. The Biden Administration represents the leadership of the United States Democratic Party and, despite some bipartisan legislative efforts, has stuck closely to party lines. Bierman (2022) writes that "among President Biden's most valuable political skills has been a knack for planting himself firmly at the ideological center of the Democratic Party," (para. 1). This indicates President Biden's Administration would likely fall under "Strong Democrat" in research (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2021).

Political ideology has been shown to have a moderating effect on the relationship between an organization's communication and its audience's perception of that communication (Villagra et al., 2021). Their study focused on political ideology in the context of corporate communication; the opportunity for public sector exploration of political ideology as a moderating variable on this relationship is still open.

The polarization of the U.S. political sphere can make it difficult for administrations to garner support for policy from those of a different political ideology. This polarization, as well as the increasing influence of digital spaces, has made it easier for individuals to only be exposed to content with which they agree (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2021). This phenomenon speaks to

individuals' tendency to avoid messages that challenge their pre-existing beliefs, a notion often referred to as selective exposure or confirmation bias (Knobloch-Westerwick et al., 2015). This means that partisan communicators face an even greater challenge than garnering public support; they face a challenge of getting their messages to their audience. Knobloch-Westerwick et al.'s (2015) 2-session online field study — which tracked participants' online search results — found that while participants did not completely avoid attitude-discrepant messages, "64% more time was spent with attitude-consistent messages," (p. 181). This result implies that a person is less likely to spend time with messages from a different political ideology than their own and if a person is minimally exposed or not exposed at all to a message, the message will likely have less of an impact on their emotions.

International Tensions as a Crisis

Strategic communication challenges can be exacerbated by crises, as illustrated by the September 11th attacks. While the September 11th attacks were events with finite pre-crisis, crisis, and post crisis stages, U.S.-Russia tensions and the war in Ukraine are ongoing. Both, however, can be considered crises. One of the most popular scholarly definitions of crisis comes from Coombs (2007), who defines the phenomenon as "a sudden and unexpected event that threatens to disrupt an organization's operations and poses both a financial and a reputational threat," (para. 6).

This notion of a crisis can be challenged, however, with even earlier scholarship, which contends that crises are not simply discrete events, but processes unfolding and "should be understood as periods of upheaval and collective stress," (Rosenthal et al., 2001, p. 5). As of August 2022, U.S. tension with Russia and the war in Ukraine are unfolding and undoubtedly causing collective stress (Holcombe, 2022). Further, Bloch-Elkon and Lehman-Wilzig (2005)

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note that international crises can be divided into three stages which allow for the understanding of a crisis as an ongoing situation: Onset, escalation, and de-escalation. Rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia would put this crisis in the onset stage, characterized by "change in the intensity of disruption between two or more states, a significant increase in the potential for violence and the perception of threat by at least one of them," (p. 12). It is unclear yet if this crisis will certainly go into escalation — the peak of a crisis, including significant increase in disruption and a growing likelihood of the use of military force — before heading to de-escalation.

Another way in which Coombs' definition does not hold up for the public sector is the type of threat that a crisis poses. The reputational threat is present for both the private and public sector, but the financial threat is likely to be more prevalent for an organization which prioritizes profit such as a private sector organization. Additionally, Coombs leaves out, perhaps, the greatest threat a crisis in the public sector poses: National security. Crises can also have multiple dimensions as Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1997) point out, including "international, domestic, local, or organizational dimensions, or they can involve a mixture: for example, threat of nuclear war," (p. 280). Putin's threats of nuclear weapon use, position this crisis squarely into this type of crisis threat.

Crisis Communication in the Public Sector

The presence of a crisis is the essential exigency for crisis communication, a form of strategic communication. Crisis communication research took off in 1995, when publications from William L. Benoit and Timothy Coombs set the foundations for two of the field's most recognized theories — image repair theory and situational crisis communication theory, respectively (Frandsen & Johansen, 2020). Since then, some applications and scholarship in

crisis communication have explored both the private and public sectors (Arcila-Calderón et al., 2021; Coombs, 2015; Kim, & Lui 2012). These works have illuminated several factors that distinguish public sector crisis communication from that of the private sector.

Many of these factors are similar to those mentioned above which distinguish general public and private sector strategic communication. Kim & Lui (2012) also highlight unique crisis communication challenges the public sector faces, including legal frameworks, politics, and federalism. Legal frameworks and politics mean that government crisis managers, as opposed to their corporate counterparts, are

> (a) more restricted in the creativity of their message development; (b) have
>
> increased external influences like public interest groups; (c) have increased
>
> complexity in deciding what information to share and how; and (d) have higher
>
> need for public support for postcrisis programs and initiatives, (p. 70).

The impact of federalism means there are additional challenges with coordinating communication efforts with various other government entities. The need to coordinate with multiple entities can make strategic efforts sluggish (Jordan, 2008), a definite weakness in a crisis situation.

Another challenge of crisis communication in the public sector is communicator disconnect with stakeholders. In crisis "government leaders at all levels are consumed with doing what they *think* the people need, but they often do not attempt to monitor the climate of public opinion to learn what they *actually* need," (Horsley, 2005, p. 1).

In addition to the challenges of crisis communication, the goals of crisis communication vary by organization and situation, but often include reputation management and stakeholder wellbeing, which are not mutually exclusive. In fact, an organization's reputation — private or

public sector — can be affected by its efforts to ensure stakeholder wellbeing. Organizations have an ethical responsibility to stakeholders, Coombs (2007) argues, therefore organizations' crisis communication goals should prioritize stakeholder wellbeing. Both private and public sector organizations face market pressure, but public sector organizations are even more bound to ethical responsibility to stakeholders since they were created to serve citizens (Liu & Horsley, 2007). As mentioned above, though, garnering support for policy decisions is a prominent government communication goal. Communicating a priority of stakeholder wellbeing might be just what public sector organizations need to do to achieve that goal.

In terms of communication strategy, many scholars have sought to understand how the public sector *should* be different from the private sector, but there is less scholarship about what the public sector *actually* does differently. Liu and Horsley (2007) outline the government-specific scholarship that has sought to understand what the public sector *should* do in regard to communication. The field of public relations has traditionally applied the same models to the public and private sectors in all scenarios (p. 378), which is a possible reason for the lack of distinction between what strategies public and private sector organizations *actually* employ. Some scholarship, however, has begun to shed some light. Kim and Liu (2012), for example, in their study of organizational responses to the 2009 flu pandemic, found that government organizations, as opposed to corporate organizations, emphasized information-giving strategies. This study is grounded in the situational crisis communication theory, in which the information-giving strategies are part of the base crisis response. The other strategies addressed in Kim and Liu's (2012) study fall under the category of reputation management.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory

The situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) was developed by Timothy Coombs as a means to provide organizations with "evidence-based crisis communication guidance" to mitigate the reputational damages of a crisis (Coombs, 2007, para. 1). SCCT takes a stakeholder-centered approach, focusing on how stakeholders are affected physically, emotionally, and/or financially by a crisis. By recognizing these effects, Coombs posits that organizations will better understand how to protect their reputation given a crisis. That said, organizations have an ethical responsibility during and after a crisis to protect stakeholders from harm, which takes priority over protecting their reputation (para. 8).

This ethical responsibility is addressed in the base crisis response, which includes instructing information and adapting information. Instructing information is that which aims to protect stakeholders from the physical harm of a crisis. For example, in the event of a natural disaster like a hurricane or tornado, instructing information might include where to seek refuge or how to contact emergency responders.

Adapting information aims to protect stakeholders from the psychological effects of a crisis. This type of information tells stakeholders what is going on. Specifically, it includes what happened, what the organization is doing about it (corrective action), and an expression of sympathy for victims (para. 9). Crises create stress and adapting information should help manage this stress by fulfilling stakeholder's need for information.

Psychological Effects of a Crisis

The psychological effects of a crisis can be understood also as the "collective stress" that Rosenthal et al. (2001) acknowledge or the "crisis emotions" that are heavily researched in the communication field. Coombs (2015) breaks down the psychological effects of a crisis into anger

and anxiety. As this study seeks to understand the impact of adapting information on psychological effects specifically, these are the only crisis emotions that will be measured, but they are just two of the four crisis emotions laid out by the widely studied integrated crisis mapping model, which also includes fright and sadness. Anxiety is the default crisis emotion, while anger, fright and sadness vary by situation (Jin et al., 2016).

Anxiety occurs as a result of an "imminent, specific, and overpowering threat," (p. 291) and the presence of ambiguity (Coombs, 2015). Stakeholders experience anger as a result of an offense where blame can be attributed to someone or something (Jin et al., 2016). Lee et. al. (2021) categorize anger under external-attribution-dependent emotions, meaning they require responsibility attribution outside of oneself. External-attribution-dependent emotions differ, therefore, from internal-attribution-dependent emotions like guilt or shame, which one attributes to themself. When seeking to understand stakeholders' levels of anger, therefore, it is important to also determine where stakeholders' attribute any anger.

Psychological effects of a crisis, or crisis emotions, have been studied as both outcomes and predictors of behavior (Kim & Cameron, 2011; Jin et al., 2016). This study is taking the dominant approach of studying them as an outcome, *because* of their predictive power. There is evidence in scholarship to suggest that the objectives and functions of strategic government communication about national security — Informing and garnering support for policy, specifically — can be predicted to some extent by crisis emotions. Anger in particular has been shown to drive negative secondary crisis communication and reactions (Utz et al., 2013), which could translate to stakeholder support for policy. Both Lee et al. (2021) and Jin et al. (2016) found that crisis emotions, like anger and anxiety, lead to higher levels of information seeking. Jin et al. (2016) also found that these emotions could predict information sharing. It follows

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logically, then, that stakeholders' anger and anxiety could influence their support, or lack thereof, for policy decisions relating to the situation about which they are seeking, receiving, and sharing information.

Another variable influencing emotions, which Jin et al. (2016) introduced in their study, is involvement and they found that it, alongside crisis emotions, had predictive power over information seeking and sharing. Involvement refers to "the degree to which consumers perceive an issue to be personally relevant," (Choi & Lin, 2009, p. 19). It can be understood as involvement with the crisis situation and involvement with prior media coverage (Jin et al., 2016). Choi and Lin (2009) noted that involvement can be a predictor of the strength of crisis emotions. McDonald and Härtel (2000) bring in the element of communication, taking this notion a step further toward behavior prediction. Citing Petty and Cacioppo's elaboration likelihood model, they assert that "the higher the level of involvement, the closer the attention the consumer will pay to the message (p. 801). This study aims to test if involvement can, therefore, moderate the relationship between perceived adapting information — the message participants receive — and stakeholders' experienced psychological effects.

Model of Study

Context: Government communication to domestic stakeholders about international tensions

Adapting Information
(perceptions of)

H1

Political Ideology ──H2──▶ ◀──H3── Involvement

Psychological Effects
(a) Anger
(b) Anxiety
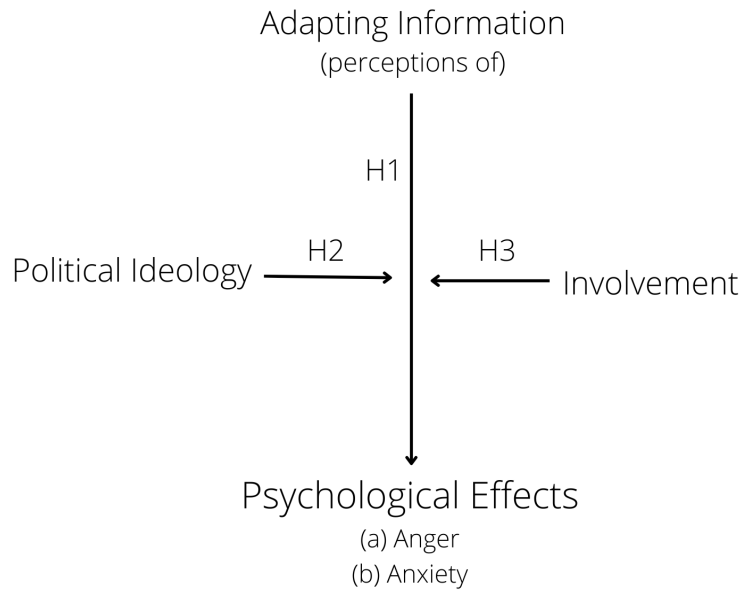
H1: As participants' perceived level of the administration's adapting information increases, their level of experienced psychological effects will decrease.

H2: As participants' political ideology gets further from that of the administration, the relationship between perceived adapting information and psychological effects will be weaker.

H3: The higher the level of participant involvement with the crisis and prior media coverage, the stronger the relationship between perceived adapting information and psychological effects will be.

Method

Sample

    I conducted a survey of 644 participants, U.S. citizens and residents from 43 states and Washington D.C. The survey method allows for large participation, without geographical

barriers. As the state of the U.S.-Russia relationship is ever-evolving, a survey method was also ideal for quick collection of ample data to provide insight into the present situation. Participants were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk and compensated $.50 for their completion of the survey.

Participants included U.S. citizens and residents to represent domestic stakeholders. Participants were asked basic demographic information including age (84.3% of participants were 18-49), gender (57.1% reported male, 42.7% reported female, and .2% reported non-binary/third gender), and level of education attained (67.1% reported having a 4-year Bachelor's degree).

Procedure

The survey consisted of 38 questions aimed at understanding participants' relevant demographics, involvement, psychological effects (anger and anxiety), perceptions of the Biden Administration's adapting information about the situation, and political ideology. These categories were laid out in this order. Political ideology was measured last to ensure that prior items were answered with little to no conscious regard for political ideology. All data was collected on August 3, 2022.

Measures

Perceptions of Adapting Information. Perceptions of adapting information were measured under three prongs based on Coombs' (2007) definition — extent to which participants believe the administration has communicated about the situation, extent to which participants believe the administration has communicated what it is doing about the situation (corrective action), and extent to which participants believe the administration has expressed concern for those affected

by the situation. Each of these were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "completely disagree" to "completely agree" (3 items; Cronbach α = .96; M: 3.19; SD: 2.10).

Political Ideology. Participants were asked which of the following best describes their political ideology. Options included Strong Democrat, Leaning Democrat, Independent, Leaning Republican, Strong Republican, and Something else (M: 2.36; SD: 1.50). Use of political parties to describe political ideology is consistent with prior research (Calderón et. al., 2021).

Involvement. Involvement was measured by two prongs — Involvement with the situation and involvement with prior media coverage about the situation. Guided by previous literature (Zaichkowsky, 1994), four measurements were laid out for involvement with the crisis situation and five were laid out for involvement with prior media coverage (9 items, Cronbach α = .95; M: 4.62; SD: 1.33). Both were measured on a 7-point semantic differential scale ranging from "unimportant" to "important," from "irrelevant" to "relevant," from "meaningless" to "meaningful," and from "uninvolving" to "involving." Involvement with prior media coverage included a fifth scale ranging from "worthless" to "valuable." The situation — increased tensions between the U.S. and Russia — does not lend itself well to a value judgment so that scale was left out for involvement with the situation.

Psychological Effects. The psychological effects included measurements of anger and anxiety. As this study aims to look at the specific connection Coombs (2007) makes between adapting information and psychological effects, anger and anxiety will be brought together as one measure of psychological effects per Coombs' (2015) definition.

The Discrete Emotions Questionnaire was used for participants to self-report their emotions. The measure of psychological effects asked participants about their feelings while thinking about the rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia. Following Harmon-Jones et al.

(2016), the emotions measured included anger items — "mad," "rage," and "pissed off" — and anxiety items — "dread," "nervous," and "worry." Participants were asked to determine the degree to which they feel these emotions on a 7-point scale ranging from "not at all" to "an extreme amount" (6 items, Cronbach α =.93; M: 4; SD: 1.60). Another measure was used in the survey to gauge psychological effects, but was found to be unreliable.

The attribution of participants' anger was measured as well. Participants were asked to choose all answers that apply to the following statement: "My anger is attributed to [blank]." Options included "Vladimir Putin," "Russia," "The Biden Administration," "The Trump Administration," "Other U.S. government entities," "The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)," "Noone/Nothing in particular," "Not Applicable/I'm not angry," and "Other, please specify."

Results

A hierarchical multiple regression was run to assess the ability of perceived adapting information to predict experienced psychological effects with the moderation of involvement and political ideology, after controlling for U.S. citizenship status and age. Variables were standardized due to an issue of multicollinearity. Adapting information, involvement, and political ideology were entered at Step 1, explaining 38.9% of the variance in psychological effects (anger and anxiety). After the entry of the control measures at Step 2, the total variance explained by the model as a whole was 39%. The 2 control measures explained an additional .01% of the variance in psychological effects after accounting for involvement and ideology responding, *R squared change* = .001, $F(2, 638) = 81.53$, $p=<.001$.

Table 1

Coefficients

Variable	β	t	Sig.
Adapting Information	.137	3.621	<.001
Ideology	-.063	-2.011	.045
Involvement	.537	15.097	<.001
Adapting Information * Involvement	.030	.894	.372
Adapting Information * Ideology	-.001	-.043	.966

Notes: * Denotes Moderation

Contrary to the prediction of H1, adapting information and psychological effects were found to have a statistically significant positive correlation (β = .137, p = < .001). This result indicates that as participants perceived greater levels of adapting information from the Biden Administration, their levels of anger and anxiety increased.

The interaction effects between adapting information and political ideology (H2) and adapting information and involvement (H3) were not significant. However, both variables had significant effects on psychological effects, anger and anxiety.

In exploring the relationship between political ideology and psychological effects, results indicated that political ideology had a weak, negative impact on psychological effects and was statistically significant (β = -.063, p = .045). As participant's political ideology grew further from that of the Biden Administration — when political ideology was more Republican — stakeholders experienced less levels of anger and anxiety about the crisis.

In exploring the relationship between involvement and psychological effects, results indicated that involvement had the strongest influence on psychological effects of any of the

variables ($\beta = .537$, $p = < .001$). Higher involvement contributed to a greater experience of psychological effects, anger and anxiety.
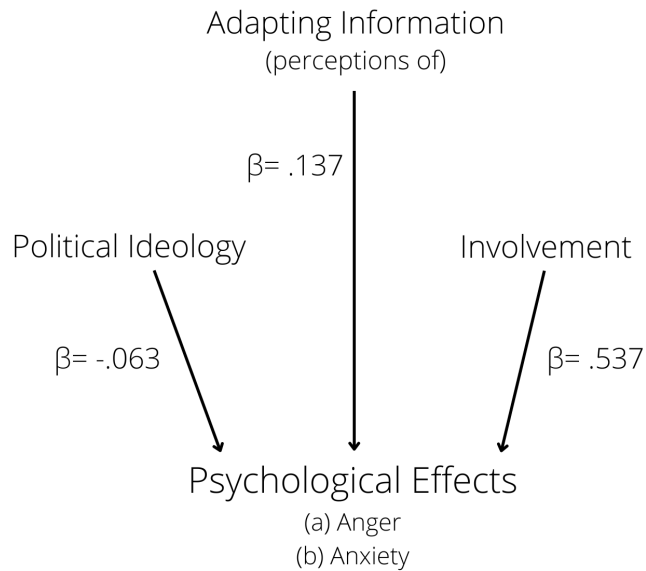
Table 2

Anger Attribution

Attribution	Number Selected	Percentage
Russia	407	63.2
Vladimir Putin	251	39.0
The Biden Administration	242	37.6
The Trump Administration	211	32.8
Other U.S. Government Entities	191	29.7
The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)	128	19.9
Noone/Nothing in Particular	85	13.2
Not Applicable/I'm Not Angry	46	7.1
Other, please specify	4	.6
Total Sample	644	100.0

The majority of respondents (63.2%) said their anger was directed at Russia as a whole. While not a majority, the second highest entity at which anger was directed was Russian President Vladimir Putin (39%), followed closely by the Biden Administration (37.6%) and the Trump Administration (32.8%). 29.7% said their anger was directed at Other U.S. Government Entities, 19.9% said NATO, and 13.2% said Noone or Nothing in Particular. Only 7.1% said they were not angry. 4 participants (.6%) selected "Other, please specify" but none specified.

Model of Results

Context: Government communication to domestic stakeholders about international tensions

Adapting Information
(perceptions of)

$\beta = .137$

Political Ideology   Involvement

$\beta = -.063$ $\beta = .537$

Psychological Effects
(a) Anger
(b) Anxiety

Discussion

The findings of this study provide insight into the influence of adapting information, involvement, and political ideology on stakeholder's levels of anger and anxiety during a crisis. This study also helps further understanding of crisis communication in the public sector as opposed to the private sector at which most crisis communication research and guidance is directed. Finally, this study reveals that differences between the public and private sector may contribute to a disconnect between SCCT and the public sector.

To contextualize this discussion, it is important to note the state of affairs during the time this study was conducted. During the summer of 2022, "the Russian seizure of several Ukrainian ports and subsequent blockade of Ukrainian food exports compounded an already acute global food crisis further exacerbated by climate change, inflation, and supply chain havoc," (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022, para. 15). This represents a significant, rippling impact on the world

outside of Ukraine and Russia. This, no doubt, puts pressure on the U.S., as a world leader, to react. Increased U.S. involvement might impact stakeholders' experience of psychological effects and their information-seeking behaviors.

In this situation, perception of the Biden Administration's use of adapting information was shown to have a strong, positive impact on stakeholders' levels of experienced psychological effects, anger and anxiety. While the moderation interactions of political ideology and involvement were not significant, both variables were shown to have significant impact on participants' levels of anger and anxiety.

Coombs (2007) theorized that adapting information could be used to lessen the impact of psychological effects during a crisis. As participants perceived more adapting information, however, levels of anger and anxiety increased. Adapting information was measured with three items, two of which might have contributed to this result. The first was a measure of how much information participants believed the Biden Administration gave about the situation. The multicollinearity of adapting information and involvement suggests that as the amount of information perceived went up, so did involvement. Involvement consists not only of closeness to the situation, but closeness to media coverage which likely includes coverage of the Administration and its response (Jin et al., 2016). Involvement also had a positive correlation with psychological effects; therefore it would make sense that as adapting information went up so too would psychological effects.

The second item asked participants to what extent they believed the Biden Administration had communicated about what they were doing about the situation. Trust in the government remains particularly low; therefore, when participants are aware of what the Biden Administration is doing about a situation, they might be likely to question it (Fitzgerald, 2022;

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Pew Research, 2022, June 6). This suggests a need to include the factor of trust in public sector crisis communication. Organizations should not blindly assume that more information will contribute to more or less emotions, but rather seek to understand stakeholders' trust in them and how that level of trust might impact the relationship between information-giving and psychological effects.

The result of H1 goes against what Coombs (2007) theorized, indicating that SCCT's base crisis response may have limited use in the public sector, particularly in international crisis contexts. This paper looks at "crisis" from a public relations perspective which emphasizes organizational reputation, but the context of international relations suggests another conception of crisis. The problem with the theory's application to the situation, therefore, could be the use of a public relations crisis theory to examine an international relations crisis. In international relations a crisis might not be that which threatens credibility or trust, but rather stability, order and security. How the government and its stakeholders respond to the crisis, therefore, would be different than what the theory predicts.

Important to note also is that the Administration's policy goals might not necessitate calm stakeholders, and garnering support for sanctions on Russian officials or funding to Ukraine means the Biden Administration wants to get stakeholders angry and/or anxious. If the Administration's goal was more anger and anxiety, it would make sense, given the results of this study, that it would emphasize information-giving strategies. As Kim and Liu (2012) note, government organizations tend to employ information-giving strategies in crisis more than corporate organizations.

Since anger is external-attribution-dependent, as Lee et. al. (2021) point out, it would be important to make sure anger is directed toward the parties that the policies negatively impact.

The majority of participants said their anger is directed toward Russia, followed by Russian President Vladimir Putin. While still high on the list of anger attributions, the Biden Administration trailed behind these two. This is good news in regard to garnering support for the policy decisions the Biden Administration has put forth. The Administration has also stood firm in support of Ukraine and called out Russian leadership for aggression toward Ukraine. The anger-attribution results hint that the Biden Administration's reputation has not been terribly impacted by this crisis. This could, however, indicate that the Biden Administration put more emphasis on reputation management and controlling attribution of responsibility than it did on the base crisis response's goal of addressing stakeholder wellbeing.

The maintenance of an organization's reputation is the aim of SCCT. While Coombs (2007) argues organizations have an ethical responsibility to stakeholders, government organizations have a "higher need for public support for post crisis programs and initiatives," (Kim & Lui, 2012, p. 70). The needs of the public sector organization are, therefore, competing with the goals of the theory. The theory posits that as an organization provides more adapting information, psychological effects on stakeholders will lessen. The opposite result obtained in this study suggests that the base crisis response might not be able to accommodate the competing interests of a public sector organization.

H2 and H3 were not supported, but the variables of political ideology and involvement did have significant effects on participants' experience of psychological effects, anger and anxiety. As participants got further away from the Biden Administration's ideology, they experienced less psychological effects. The significance of this finding was marginal, so the differences between political ideology and experience of psychological effects were not vast. There could, however, be a partisan difference in how much U.S. citizens and residents care

about foreign affairs in general. In a 2020 NPR and Ipsos survey of 1009 U.S. adults, 53 percent of Republican respondents said the U.S. should stay out of the affairs of other countries, as opposed to 48 percent of Democrat respondents (Horsley, 2017). Republicans could also be angry that the U.S. is involved in the war at all. Pew Research Center (2022, September 22) found that Republicans are becoming increasingly likely to say the U.S. is providing Ukraine too much support.

The base crisis response does not account for political ideology at all, let alone take into account *how* it might impact the crisis response. Politics, however, are the "essence" of the public sector as Liu and Horsley (2007) mention. This disconnect relates to the competing interests of public sector organizations for which the base crisis response has not accounted. Inclusion of political ideology as a consideration could help bridge the gap between taking care of stakeholders' wellbeing and reaching that higher standard of public support for crisis initiatives.

Involvement was shown to be the most significant predictor of experienced psychological effects, anger and anxiety. The more involved in the situation and media coverage participants were, the more they experienced psychological effects from the situation. This finding is in line with that of Choi and Lin (2009) who showed involvement to be a predictor of crisis emotion strength. This supports the prioritization of involvement in crisis communication research and practice. Measuring involvement first could give a baseline understanding of stakeholder emotions by which the most appropriate communication strategy could be judged. If involvement in the crisis situation can influence how closely a person pays attention to messages about the crisis as McDonald and Härtel (2000) suggest, an understanding of stakeholder

involvement could determine how much and what kind of effort should go into disseminating a message. Once that is determined, further consideration can be given to the message itself.

As mentioned earlier, SCCT takes a stakeholder-centered approach, focusing on how stakeholders are affected physically, emotionally, and/or financially by a crisis. So, not only is SCCT not meeting the goals of the public sector, according to the result of this study this public sector response has not met the foundations of the theory. The need for further understanding of stakeholder involvement speaks to a general need for the public sector to include more stakeholder research in its crisis communication planning. By doing so, the public sector could better tailor its communication to what stakeholders *actually* need/want rather than what government leaders *think* they need/want, a problem which Horsley (2005) noted in regard to public sector crisis communication. Such efforts could also, more broadly, bring the public sector closer to meeting the ethical demands of a crisis response. This is a goal in which the public sector should be interested, as it is believed to be lagging behind in that regard (Liu & Horsley, 2007).

During a crisis, however, time is often of the essence. Once a crisis strikes there is limited time to address it, and polling stakeholders to figure out how they feel before making a decision on response is not likely a priority. This is especially true for the public sector in which hierarchical structures, legal frameworks, and need for inter-agency cooperation often cause it to lag behind in response time and quality (Kim & Lui, 2012; Jordan, 2008). Therefore, crisis planning — in advance of a crisis situation and tailored to stakeholder needs — is especially needed for public sector organizations. Crisis plans should also include ethical considerations and standards for a given crisis. It is impossible to know exactly how stakeholders will feel in the midst of a crisis before that crisis happens, but tracking possible crises and conducting research

which presents the possibility of specific crisis situations to stakeholders could provide insight into the likely reactions of stakeholders given that situation.

Limitations

While these results are able to provide some insights to inform both crisis communication research and public sector crisis communication practice, this study has a few notable limitations. The survey method allows for a preliminary look at correlation between the variables, but an experimental method could dive deeper into cause and effect. All participants were given the same survey on the same topic. There were no stimuli nor control groups for comparison.

This study is also limited in the scope of what it measures. Firstly, it only measures participants' perceptions of the Biden Administration's adapting information and does not identify to what extent the Biden Administration has actually communicated with the components of adapting information. Secondly, this study measures what Coombs (2015) defined psychological effects to be — anger and anxiety — but these are not the only crisis emotions. The integrated crisis mapping model also acknowledges fright and sadness as crisis emotions. Also unavailable is an insider's look into the Administration's communication planning, its intended messaging, or its exact communication objectives.

Additionally, the variable of involvement includes both involvement with the situation and involvement with prior media coverage. It is, therefore, difficult to determine how much involvement is shaped by media coverage specifically from or about the organization being studied versus media coverage that exists outside the context of that organization. In this context, that means it is unclear how much stakeholders' involvement was from media coverage on the Biden Administration's response versus other media coverage about the situation.

Most importantly, this crisis is still ongoing. As mentioned above, it is likely in the onset stage of an international crisis (Bloch-Elkon & Lehman-Wilzig, 2005). This study cannot look at the crisis as a whole at this current stage. It also did not measure past emotions, such as the emotions of stakeholders as the onset of the war. This survey only provided a snapshot of stakeholder's perceptions and emotions at the time they answered the questions.

Recommendations

Due to the findings and limitations, this research encourages several avenues moving forward. Further research should track these same metrics as the crisis continues to unfold into the escalation and de-escalation stages. The de-escalation, or post-crisis stage, is of particular interest for looking at this situation holistically. Additionally, involvement and adapting information initially had high levels of multicollinearity. Future research should aim to understand how much of a person's involvement with a crisis comes from the adapting information they receive.

Since this research focused only on stakeholders' anger and anxiety, further research could look more holistically at stakeholder emotions. Perhaps, bringing in the integrated crisis mapping model could achieve this aim and also provide insight into the compatibility of another crisis communication model to the public sector. To also support the bolstering of public sector ethical standards, mental health research could be included in such studies. Research on mental health and strategic communication could provide unique insights further bridging ethical considerations during a crisis with stakeholder emotions.

Also, given the impossibility of determining whether involvement with prior media coverage means coverage of the Biden Administration's response or other coverage about the situation, further research should seek to avoid this issue. To do this, involvement with prior

media coverage might need to be divided into two items: One which asks about media coverage of an organization's response and one which specifically asks about media coverage on the situation in which the organization being studied is not mentioned.

Another interesting finding, which was not related to any of the hypotheses, is how much greater anger was toward Russia generally than President Vladimir Putin. Nearly twice the number of participants attributed their anger toward the country as a whole than toward the President who has been the primary decision-maker in the country's aggression. The opportunity exists, therefore, to explore how government communication about international crises impacts domestic stakeholders' perceptions of foreign stakeholders. Domestic stakeholders' recognition, or lack thereof, of the difference between state actors and their countries entirely (including everyday citizens of those countries) is particularly interesting. How this might contribute to domestic stakeholder support for policies like acceptance of refugees from adversarial countries also remains to be examined.

Conclusion

The U.S.-Russia relationship continues to become increasingly hostile as a result of the war between Russia and Ukraine, indicating the presence of a crisis. Despite major differences in the types of crisis threats, communication challenges, and strategic goals, the public and private sectors have often been regarded as the same in crisis communication research and practice.

H1 of this study, in line with SCCT's base crisis response, predicted that as domestic stakeholders perceived more adapting information from the Biden Administration about rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia, they would experience less psychological effects. H2 and H3 posited that political ideology and involvement respectively would have moderating effects

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on that relationship. None of the hypotheses were fully supported, but results provided several important insights nonetheless.

Collectively, the findings of this study support a call for crisis communication research to move away from the traditional practice, which Liu and Horsley (2007) noted, of applying the same models of communication to both the private and public sectors. On the side of public sector practice, findings suggest a need to focus more on the ethical implications of crisis communication and the actual needs of stakeholders.

Much remains to be seen as this crisis continues to unfold, but this study continues the discussion of the differences between public and private sector communication and suggests some paths to alter research and communication practices in such ways that acknowledge these differences. Doing so can only improve the quality of communication by the public sector and provide better outcomes when international crises arise.

Appendix

Survey Questionnaire Content

The following survey is part of graduate student research at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University. It is intended to gauge U.S. citizens' and residents' involvement in and knowledge of the escalating U.S.-Russia tensions following Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. It also seeks to understand the emotions surrounding the situation and participants' perceptions of related government communication.

Whenever one works with email or the internet, there is always the risk of compromising privacy, confidentiality, and/or anonymity. Your confidentiality will be maintained to the degree permitted by the technology being used. It is important for you to understand that no guarantees can be made regarding the interception of data sent via the internet by third parties. This survey should take approximately 15 minutes and participants may leave the survey at any time. If participants choose to leave the survey before completion, their survey answers will be discarded. Participants must be 18 years or older to participate in this survey.

For questions, comments, or complaints about this research, please contact Elisabeth Shirk at eshirk@syr.edu.

Do you want to participate in this survey?
Yes
No

Demographics
- What is your U.S. citizenship status?
    - U.S. citizen
    - U.S. resident (conditional or permanent)
    - Not a U.S. citizen (skip to end)
    - Prefer not to say (skip to end)
- What is your age?
    - 18-34
    - 35-49
    - 50-59
    - 60+
- What is your gender?
    - Female
    - Male
    - Non-Binary
    - Prefer not to say

- What is your level of education?
  - Did not complete high school
  - High school graduate or GED
  - Some college but did not graduate
  - 2-year Associate's degree
  - 4-year Bachelor's degree
  - Post graduate degree in progress
  - Post graduate degree completed
- In which state do you currently reside?
  - AL
  - AK
  - AZ
  - AR
  - CA
  - CO
  - CT
  - DE
  - D.C., Washington
  - FL
  - GA
  - HI
  - ID
  - IL
  - IN
  - IA
  - KS
  - KY
  - LA
  - ME
  - MD
  - MA
  - MI
  - MN
  - MS
  - MO
  - MT
  - NE
  - NV
  - NH
  - NJ

- ○ NM
- ○ NY
- ○ NC
- ○ ND
- ○ OH
- ○ OK
- ○ OR
- ○ PA
- ○ RI
- ○ SC
- ○ SD
- ○ TN
- ○ TX
- ○ UT
- ○ VT
- ○ VA
- ○ WA
- ○ WV
- ○ WI
- ○ WY

Please read the information below before answering the following questions

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a military invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent war has led to increased tensions between the United States and Russia.

Involvement
- ● To me <u>rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia</u> are
  - ○ Unimportant - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Important
  - ○ Irrelevant - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Relevant
  - ○ Meaningless - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Meaningful
  - ○ Uninvolving- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Involving
- ● To me <u>media coverage about rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia</u> are
  - ○ Unimportant - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Important
  - ○ Irrelevant - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Relevant
  - ○ Meaningless - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Meaningful
  - ○ Worthless - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Valuable
  - ○ Uninvolving- 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Involving

Psychological Effects
- While thinking about rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia, to what extent do you feel the following emotions? (Not at all, slightly, somewhat, moderately, quite a bit, very much, an extreme amount) (Discrete Emotions Questionnaire)
    - Mad (Ag)
    - Rage (Ag)
    - Pissed off (Ag)
- My anger is attributed to __ (please select all that apply)
    - Vladimir Putin
    - Russia
    - The Biden Administration
    - The Trump Administration
    - Other U.S. government entities
    - The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
    - Noone/Nothing in particular
    - Not Applicable/I'm not angry
    - Other, please specify: ___
- While thinking about rising tensions between the U.S. and Russia, to what extent do you feel the following emotions? (Not at all, slightly, somewhat, moderately, quite a bit, very much, an extreme amount) (Discrete Emotions Questionnaire)
    - Dread (Ax)
    - Nervous (Ax)
    - Worry (Ax)

Adapting Information
Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements regarding the Biden Administration's communication about increased tensions between the U.S. and Russia since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- I believe the Biden Administration has provided an adequate amount of information about the situation.
    - Completely disagree - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Completely agree
- I believe the Biden Administration has provided an adequate amount of information about what they are doing about the situation.
    - Completely disagree - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Completely agree
- I believe the Biden Administration has expressed concern for those affected by the situation.
    - Completely disagree - 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 - Completely agree

Political Ideology
- Which of the following best describes your political party affiliation?

- ○ Strong Democrat
- ○ Lean Democrat
- ○ Independent
- ○ Lean Republican
- ○ Strong Republican
- ○ Something else

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Manage the Science and Technology Innovation Program's social media accounts on LinkedIn and Twitter, using Buffer to manage content

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Coordinate internal communication with the team through Airtable and Asana

Social Media Intern *June-July 2020*

Assisted Social Media Manager using Buffer to create and manage content for Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn

Worked as part of a two-person team tasked with creating a digital campaign with two interactive timelines, a personality quiz, trivia quizzes, and quote cards to be published on social media and the Center's website

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