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Presidents and Media during Initial Federal-Level Hurricane Relief: A study of presidential crisis communication efforts

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**Presidents and Media during Initial Federal-Level Hurricane Relief: A study of
presidential crisis communication efforts**

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Communication Arts.

By
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Under the mentorship of Dr. Pamela Bourland-Davis

ABSTRACT

Public relations serves a huge role in almost every sector, including politics. Crisis communication, a subset of public relations, is very important in a setting that constantly undergoes crises. The response to these crises matters a great deal on the federal level because the outcomes can affect such a wide variety of policies and even elections. Because of this, I wanted to focus on one type of crisis that every president is almost guaranteed to face: hurricanes. To examine the effectiveness of federal-level crisis communication, I look at Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden's responses to the worst hurricane during their terms and determine the elements of each that are most important in developing messages. It is important to address this in order to understand what methods work best in curating messages for disasters that affect a large portion of the population. I will use the Strategic Framing Taxonomy along with artifacts like Twitter posts, photographs, news footage, and statements or press releases to analyze the different messages from each president.

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Public relations serves as the liaison between brands, companies, and individuals and their publics. The Public Relations Society of America describes public relations as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (Public Relations Society of America, 2022, para. 1). Furthermore, PR work can include analyzing public opinion, protecting the reputation of an organization, researching, and content creation (Public Relations Society of America, 2022). All of these processes can be used to engage and build “a relationship with key stakeholders across numerous platforms in order to shape and frame the public perception of an organization” (Public Relations Society of America, 2022).

Image and relationship building becomes increasingly important when moving into the realm of politics. Politicians must gain the trust of their constituents in order to secure votes and do their jobs effectively. This means they must utilize public relations to create a relationship with their target audience.

However, there is little research about how the two work in conjunction. It is important to understand how politicians can use public relations for many different reasons. One of the most critical is that politicians are faced with crisis situations much more regularly. One type of crisis that almost every politician will have to deal with is natural disasters. These crises are not caused by any wrongdoing on anyone’s part; they are simply an act of nature, which is why politicians must understand how to maintain a positive image when these things happen, even in a state that did not provide voting support.

This paper will analyze both media coverage and official statements and releases from the White House in terms of disaster relief. I will examine how the media portrays several

presidents during their visits to the areas that were affected by a natural disaster during their term along with their office's official statements regarding the crisis. Analyzing each case will reveal differences in how each president dealt with the crisis and if any approach in particular seemed to work better than the others. By isolating the most successful case, we can start to understand how government public relations can be used to best respond to a natural disaster crisis. A better understanding of what does and does not work in terms of crisis response, specifically that of the president and their office, can help White House PR personnel better equip themselves to deal with these scenarios in the future.

Terms

A crisis is defined as “a major occurrence with a potentially negative outcome affecting the organization, company, or industry, as well as its publics, products, services, or good name. A crisis interrupts normal business transactions and can sometimes threaten the existence of the organization” (Fearn-Banks, 2017, p. 1). There are many different types of crises including, but not limited to workplace violence, rumors and misinformation, product malfunctions, and natural disasters. For the purpose of this paper, I will be looking at hurricanes and how presidents respond to this type of natural disaster crisis. I chose to look at hurricanes for each president because choosing the same type of disaster for each case will reduce possible factors that create differences between different natural disasters. Because there is a reliable pattern of hurricanes during a certain season in the United States, it ensures that each president I choose to look at will likely have experienced at least one hurricane during his time in office.

The presidents whose terms I will be studying are George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. To choose the hurricane for each president, I will look at several different factors. The hurricane must (1) be at least a category two storm at its highest, (2) cost

the government at least \$3 billion, (3) result in a state of emergency being declared for affected areas, and (4) have at least 1,000 affected people (via death, power outages, property damage, missing persons, etc). Based on these criteria, the hurricanes I have chosen to study for each president are Katrina, Sandy, Dorian, and Ian respectively.

Literature Review

Using a wide range of literature that covers many areas of crisis including natural disasters and terrorist attacks will help to establish a better understanding of the area of crisis communication as a whole. Using the artifacts I have chosen for each president, I will later apply some of the concepts and themes from the literature review to the hurricane relief scenarios for each president. Understanding hurricane relief communication from the federal government can aid in determining which methods of communication are most effective. Lachlan, Burke, Spence, and Griffin (2009) claim that “circumstances surrounding Hurricane Katrina taught communication practitioners several important lessons, arguably the most important of which is the need for effective risk communication messages in the period before a natural disaster. Perhaps, due largely to ineffective crisis messages, thousands of people in the New Orleans metropolitan area did not perceive Hurricane Katrina as a severe threat” (p. 296). How governments manage crisis communication helps with transparency, which “is critically important for government legitimacy and citizens’ trust in government,” making it even more critical to understand effective crisis communication (Reddick et al., 2016, p. 356). Furthermore, “antecedents of government transparency have been understudied and remain relatively unknown” (Reddick et al., 2016, p. 356)

The practice of public relations in government can be much different than typical PR for an organization or individual. In fact, “we know exceedingly little about how presidents’ public

relations affect administrative politics” (Candice-Wrone, 2009, p. 26). Some speculate that public opinion or approval ratings affect a president’s decisions regarding many different aspects of politics. Both public opinion and approval ratings can change based on public relations strategies. Crises add another layer of complication to the government sector of PR. Since crisis management is an aspect of public relations, the PR department of a given organization is usually the group which handles the communication of crisis related messages, just as they handle any other messaging. However, “there is limited literature regarding government communication related to compounding crises and government crisis management” (Chon, 2019, p. 424). Furthermore, managing a federal-level crisis “can be complicated by taxpayers’ opinions, elected officials’ agendas, appointed officials’ objectives, and laws particular to the public sector” (Lee et al., 2022, p. 72). All of these external factors can make it “hard to apply the private sector’s public relations models because of the different environmental characteristics between the two sectors” (Chon, 2019, p. 424).

As seen in normal, or non-political organizations, the relationship between the organization and its public is very important. This relationship contributes to the success of the organization, and the same thing can be inferred about the relationship between the government and the people. These relationships are important to develop before a crisis ever happens because “maintaining positive relationships decreases the negative impact of the crisis on the organization” (Chon, 2019, p. 430). Chon’s (2019) study suggests that using the segmentation framework may be beneficial for the government to use when handling PR. The segmentation framework is, in short, dividing publics into segments based on how alike they are. These different segments respond to messages in different ways, and dividing them up can make crisis plans more effective (Chon, 2019).

Managing Crises

It is also important to understand the stages of crises that leaders must tackle in order to provide effective communication. Fearn-Banks (2011) breaks crises into five stages. Those five stages are (1) Detection, (2) Prevention/preparation, (3). Containment, (4) Recovery, and (5) Learning (Fearn-Banks, 2011).

Detection and Prevention/preparation

While hurricanes are detectable, they are not always predictable, making them a tough crisis to deal with. Preparation for a hurricane is possible and necessary in many of cases, but they are not preventable. The detection stage begins with warning signs. It is important to think about all possible outcomes. Detection “also refers to a system within the organization in which key personnel are immediately notified of a crisis” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 5). This gives the organization, or in the case of this paper, the president and the communication sectors time to draft statements, notify crisis teams like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and prepare for the media to get the word out. “In the warning stages of a crisis, the public needs instructions concerning how to manage the crisis at a personal level. The public will then understand the urgency of the threat” (Lachlan et al., 2009, p. 297).

Containment

When dealing with any crisis, especially those on the federal level, it is important to “act expediently and decisively to gain control of the crisis situation” (Reddick et al., 2016, p. 255). If not acted upon immediately, crises can turn unpredictable, often causing negative impacts on government reputation and legitimacy (Reddick et al., 2016). This is especially important “in the aftermath of catastrophic natural disasters, aviation disasters, oil spills, and terrorism attacks”

(Reddick et al., 2016, p. 255). Furthermore, silence on the part of political leadership can trigger rumors and media framing that can be harmful to the crisis situation (Reddick et al., 2016).

Recovery

The recovery state of a crisis is simply the “efforts to return the company to business as usual” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 8). Restoring normalcy as soon as possible is an utmost priority. This will help organizations maintain a strong image and reputation. It can help in “restoring the confidence of key publics, which means communicating a return to normal business” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 8).

Learning

Learning is the last phase of crisis communication. It “is a process of examining the crisis and determining what was lost, what was gained, and how the organization performed in the crisis” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 8). By evaluating the elements of an organization's response, they are able to pinpoint warning signs that may even prevent the crisis from happening again in the future. Although experiencing a crisis does not guarantee an organization will never experience a similar one again, if handled properly, it can significantly reduce the risk.

News Media as a PR Tool

Media coverage can further complicate the process of public relations in politics. Politicians are usually always under heavy media scrutiny, and as polarization in the United States gets worse, media coverage follows suit in order to appeal to their audience. It is important to note that the media gives “the public what it wants to know rather than what it needs to know” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 28). Furthermore, “Information about a crisis reaches publics through the media more than through any other means” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 34). Most people learn about

issues from the media, so “editors and broadcasters play an important part in the political arena because they can choose what news to display” (Antoniades, 2020, p. 647). A news organization is going to choose the most noteworthy things to show, and the public is perceived to enjoy watching organizations, companies, and individuals who might have done harm to people” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 28). This means the media will report on sensational topics. Their goal, as Fearn-Banks (2011) mentions, is to sell. She discusses ways to approach crisis management in a way that works with what the news wants.

News coverage during Hurricane Katrina was heavily laden with attribution of either blame or credit. Atkeson and Maestas (2012) conducted a study that indicated “attributions were quite common in news coverage of Hurricane Katrina, with 77 percent of segments making at least one attribution of blame or credit” (p. 61). The national government was the center of most of the blame where 71% of blame segments on the news made comments specifically about the performance of the national government (Atkeson & Maestas, 2012). In terms of people and the pattern in which they tend to place blame, “in the context of a national crisis, political disposition such as partisanship is associated with the attribution of crisis responsibility” (Chon, 2019, p. 429). Partisanship in support of the ruling party means that a person is less likely to feel negatively toward the government in a crisis situation.

Social Media as a PR Tool

Social media is another thing to consider. Starting with Obama, presidents were able to utilize social media as a tool for their campaigns and continue to use the tool to communicate once they were in office. Constituents like social media because it puts “people at the center, where they are both the audience and the content creator” (Hargreaves, 2003, p 649). It allows people to see a first-hand account of things. However, this also makes it easier to frame

situations to fit a certain narrative. Recently, “the velocity of the spin cycle in business and politics has become ever more rapid, as news has become a global, interactive, round-the-clock affair” (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 39). In other words, it is easier today than ever before for politicians to frame news in whatever way they want. This has “undermined the already shaky trust in politicians” (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 38).

Strategic Advocacy Framework

A “frame,” according to Franklin Gilliam and Susan Bales (2001), scholars on the topic of communication and politics, is something that “allows an audience to interpret and to evaluate a given message” (p. 4). Furthermore, they “tell an audience how to interpret a message and even what counts as part of the message and what should be ignored by evoking particular cognitive models and not others” (Gilliam & Bales, 2001, p. 4). As an example, Gilliam and Bales (2001) suggest that referring to government assistance as “handouts” calls upon an image of laziness rather than suffering. To change the frame of an issue, “is to change the interpretive lens through which new information is processed by reorganizing the encoded elements of the frame” (Gilliam & Bales, 2001, p.4). Because of this, presidents can then reframe a hurricane to fit their goals based on the information they chose to put emphasis on.

The strategic advocacy framing taxonomy focuses on the importance of an organization’s hierarchy when dealing with public issues. This framework helps show how important the “news media is in constructing public perceptions of issues” (Bales & Gilliam, 2001, p. 5). Moscato (2022) argues that, to overturn a dominant view of these issues, organizations should “strive for message development that is closely aligned with campaign goals” (p. 81). This can be complicated by the tendency to associate political values with public issues (Moscato, 2022). There are six influential elements in the strategic framing taxonomy. These elements are

numbers, messengers, visuals, tone, metaphors and simplifying models, and context (Bales & Gilliam, 2010, as cited in Moscato, 2022). When curating a message, “it is best to draw on more than one of these elements. In conjunction with one another, these elements organize situational interpretations in a new or different way” (Moscato, 2022).

Numbers

Numbers alone do not necessarily hold any rhetorical value. However, in combination with other elements, can help show what a person or organization deems important. How the numbers are presented is more important and significant than which numbers (Moscato, 2022).

Messengers

The messengers in any particular issue play a huge role since they are the ones who share the problem with the public. They have the power to frame an issue in various different ways since these people are oftentimes the ones who communicate with the media, “write op-eds, appear in photographs, publish messages on social media, and are often seen as the physical symbol of the issue” (Gilliam & Bales, 2002, as cited in Moscato, 2022). Especially as social media grows, messengers have the power to reach such a broad audience.

Visuals

This element refers to images that can help the public understand an issue in a certain light. Images “have the power to narrow and audience focus on a particular detail or emotion” (Moscato, 2022). Visuals can be a very powerful tool because “they infuse aesthetics and emotion” into an issue by providing further context.

Tone

This element refers to the attitude messengers are invoking when constructing a certain narrative. Moscato (2022) uses examples of environmental activism to illustrate this; one of the

main groups he focuses on is Sea Shepherd. Based on their use of tone, he finds “even polarizing forms of activism can be rooted in a strategic orientation, with Sea Shepherd's members toggling between oppositional and reasonable based on whether or not the television cameras are rolling” (Moscato, 2022, p. 87). This strategic use of tone can show up in politics too.

Metaphors and simplifying models

Metaphors, analogies, and other simplifying models are useful because they help an audience understand more complex concepts in terms of things they already know. Metaphorical language can help a messenger situate an issue in terms of war or a journey (Moscato, 2022). Things can be framed as a financial issue, a human health issue, or even a moral or religious issue, which helps the problem reach a wider audience.

Context

The role of national or long-term trends in combination with the roles of geography, history, and culture are prevalent (Moscato, 2022). Dominant cultural norms like individual liberty and patriotism can be particularly useful in activism messages (Chong, 2012). Furthermore, “framing strategies of bipartisanship, patriotism, and narrative are recommended to adjoin to the more traditional frames of legality and radical social justice” (Moscato, 2022, p. 88). The bipartisan frame can be particularly useful because it recognizes the importance of political centrism and helps show key issues are shared by both Democrats and Republicans. (Chong, 2012).

Methodology

For this study, I will use the Strategic Advocacy Framework as a guide for a rhetorical analysis. I will gather a few artifacts from each president’s term to compare and analyze. For Obama, Trump, and Biden, I will select tweets that they make right as the hurricane emerges to

analyze how they frame the issue (ex. self-centered or nation-centered). To pull these tweets, I will use Twitter's advanced search option and use key words to help me find tweets about the selected hurricane. I will also select press releases to see if they match the tweets the presidents are sending. For Bush, I will attempt to find a personal statement, Facebook post, etc. Then, I will select news segments to determine how they cover the issue depending on how the president has framed it. To pick the news segment, I will look for the first video from a national, relatively unbiased source helps ensure consistency. While local news sources may be able to give more nuance and certain details, national sources will be more similar for comparative purposes. A national news source would essentially provide a control variable for assessing the changes that happen throughout each presidency. To search for the videos, I set a date range from when the hurricane hit to two weeks after. I then found the date that each president first surveyed the damages on the ground, and looked for the first available source..

After gathering these artifacts, I used the Strategic Advocacy Framework to understand how all the elements interacted with each other. Moscato adapted this method from Gilliam and Bales (2001) where they did a study on strategic framing and how it can be used to reframe America's youth. I will be adapting the framework from Moscato's iteration to better understand how different presidents responded to a national emergency.

Since none of the hurricanes chosen for this paper were nearly of the same scale as Hurricane Katrina, there is significantly less literature in those areas. Where I had Fearn-Banks' (2011) *Crisis Communication: A Casebook Approach* to give context and research in regard to Bush's case, I do not have a piece like that for my following hurricanes, meaning each of the subsequent sections will rely on the analysis of the available artifacts alone.

Bush

In order to understand this case from a PR crisis point of view, I consulted Fearn-Banks' (2011) *Crisis Communication: A Casebook Approach*. One of the cases she detailed was Bush's response to Hurricane Katrina. Despite death and destruction affecting multiple states, New Orleans is what usually comes to mind when people think of Katrina. New Orleans was also affected by "miscommunication and controversy, elements that were not so apparent in the other cities and states where nature did its damage and exited" (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 177). From a PR crisis point of view, this is a textbook case of what not to do. Engineers warned that the levees could not withstand category 4 and 5 hurricanes, and geologists predicted that a disaster like this might happen (Fearn-Banks, 2011). However, New Orleans was not equipped with the tools or money to address these issues, and, unfortunately, they received no help from the federal government. The first sign of the federal government in New Orleans came from the image of Air Force One flying over the damage on Wednesday, Aug. 31, 2005.

Numbers

Hurricane Katrina was one of the worst disasters America has faced due in part from the destructive nature of the hurricane, but also the lack of planning and preparation New Orleans was equipped with. Katrina peaked at a category 5. While it initially started as a category 1, Katrina intensified and attained Category 5 status as it moved northwest on August 28th (National Weather Service, 2022, para. 2). Katrina weakened to a Category 3 before making landfall first in southeast Louisiana (National Weather Service, 2022, para. 2). This disaster cost the government \$108 billion in 2005 dollars (National Weather Service, 2022). Louisiana governor Katherine Babineaux Blanco declared a state of emergency before the hurricane even made landfall (Chaudhuri, 2010). She also requested President Bush declare a federal level state

of emergency, which he did (Chaudhuri, 2010). The National Weather Service declared Hurricane Katrina one of five deadliest hurricanes to hit the US, resulting in 1,833 fatalities.

Messengers

The primary messengers in this case, aside from the state and local governments, should have been Bush and the White House, as they released official statements. However, since Bush took a long time to make an official statement on the issue, others instead became the primary messengers in sharing the issue with the public. This was damaging to his image because he lost control of the narrative that was being spun. Other important people, even celebrities, took over the narrative and focused on things that Bush may have been able to avoid had he spoken out sooner. Furthermore, the news media serves as messengers in these cases. As previously determined, “Information about a crisis reaches publics through the media more than through any other means” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 34). Although several different messengers have been identified, each serves a different purpose.

Visuals

Figure 1

President Bush looks out over the devastation in New Orleans



Photo by Paul Morse

In response to this photo, New Orleans Mayor Ray Nagin said, “flying over New Orleans in Air Force One did not do the crisis justice” (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 184). This sentiment was shared by most of the population. Eventually, national news outlets picked up on the story and more of Nagin’s remarks about the lack of assistance from the federal government.

As Moscato (2022) states, images have the ability to help people focus on details. What people could see from the photo was that the only effort President Bush had made thus far was to fly over the city while thousands of people were suffering below. This image would become infamous in his career. Because this is the main image that was circulating, it framed the issue in a way that, in context with everything else, made it seem like Bush was not doing all that much to help those affected by Hurricane Katrina.

As the hurricane unfolded, the media exploded with stories about what was happening. The entire world was watching to see what would happen next. On the home front, most of the coverage was focused on the conditions that thousands of New Orleanians were facing. NBC footage from August 31, 2005, was filled with video of people on rooftops with signs pleading for help, homes completely destroyed, and children that had been without resources like food and water. At this point, a combination of all these factors cemented the opinion that the president was not doing enough.

Tone

When Bush returned to D.C. after his flight over the affected areas, he delivered an address in which he laid out the plan of action moving forward. Since Twitter was not around at this time, I will be relying on personal statements from the president. He stated:

We are dealing with one of the worst natural disasters in our nation's history, and that's why I've called the Cabinet together. The people in the affected regions expect the federal government to work with the state government and local government with an effective response. (Bush, 2005, as cited in The New York Times)

In this statement, he does call for the federal government to work alongside state and local governments, showing that he is interested in creating a more nation-centered approach. However, these are only surface level comments that one should expect in a time like this. The public found much more meaning outside of his official statements. For example, a TV crew overheard Bush mention a senator who lost one of his homes, but that it would be replaced and he was looking forward to visiting (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 200). This added to the narrative that Bush was extremely out of touch with the thousands of people who were left without resources. Following this, Bush also told then FEMA director Michael Brown that he was doing a great job,

an opinion that most of the world did not share (Fearn-Banks, 2011, p. 200). This is a mirror of Moscato's example involving Sea Shepherd where a messenger's tone is different across settings. In disasters like this, the change in tone can cause problems for a messenger. When Bush discussed the disaster in private differently than he was addressing the nation, it told viewers that his tone in the public sphere was not genuine.

Metaphors and simplifying models

Due to my lack of access to some resources and artifacts in Bush's case, it was hard to find overlying metaphors. However, this is also in part because the sheer destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina served as a simplifying model itself. Most of the discussion surrounding this hurricane was centered around the fact that this disaster was on a scale that the US had never really experienced before. In a speech, Bush noted, "This is going to be a difficult road. The challenges that we face on the ground are unprecedented" (George W. Bush Presidential Library, n.d., para. 5).

Context

Kanye West made note of how the media was portraying people of color and even commented that Bush did not care about black people (Fearn-Banks, 2011). This is one example of cultural and social context that is important when determining the kind of message to send. The political context during this time is also very important to understand. In an exclusive "Good Morning America" interview, Bush encouraged people to stay away from politics at this time, saying "I hope people don't play politics at this time of a natural disaster the likes of which this country has never seen" (ABC News, 2005). As he continued to face criticism from almost all sides, he wanted to take people's eyes off politics as to lessen the harm toward his career.

There is not much of a focus on who Bush works with, nor an emphasis on working with politicians from the opposing side.

Obama

Numbers

Hurricane Sandy formed in the central Caribbean on October 22, 2012 (National Weather Service, n.d.). The hurricane made landfall as a category one hurricane in Jamaica, and as a category three hurricane in eastern Cuba before weakening back to a category one hurricane while moving through the central and northwestern Bahamas (Blake et al., 2012). It “caused over \$60 billion in damage,” making it the costliest storm since Katrina at the time (Cappucci, 2021, para. 1). Both New York governor Andrew Cuomo and New Jersey governor Chris Christie declared a state of emergency in their respective states. They requested a speedy response from President Obama, which he complied with, declaring disaster areas in both New York and New Jersey (Jackson, 2012). Hurricane Sandy claimed “at least 125 lives in the United States and knock[ed] out power to more than 7 million customers” (Cappucci, 2021, para. 1).

Messengers

The importance of Obama and the White House as official messengers can be shown through trying to find news footage from the time period. When given the parameters for searching for these videos, most of what can be found is directly from The Obama White House YouTube page. Since this administration prioritized getting in front of the crisis to cement themselves as primary messengers, they were able to create videos and curate photos to show exactly what they wanted to

Visuals

Figure 2

Obama in aerial tour of storm damage



Photo by Pete Souza

While this photo appears the same as that which put Bush under fire, it is important to understand context and how this disaster was handled much differently. In Bush's photo, he was the only one in the frame. In Figure 2, Obama is featured alongside several other people representing various organizations, showing his willingness to work in conjunction with each other. Furthermore, Obama did not wait until his return to D.C. after the plane tour to make a statement about the hurricane. Getting ahead of the issue allowed him to be the primary messenger in this narrative. He, along with the White House, released several pictures depicting him doing much more "on-the-ground" work. Plus, his response time helped show people he cared about handling this issue with care and urgency. Within two days, "President Obama was

on hand to witness the devastation, comfort residents, and pledge the full support of the federal government in the recovery effort” (Compton, 2012).

Figure 3

Obama comforts New Jersey resident



Photo by Pete Souza

The photos that Obama and the White House chose to share are extremely important because they help establish the frame in which they want their audience to view this issue from. Although it was difficult to find a news video from the time period, the clip I chose follows the same narrative set forth by Obama and his administration. The video footage is from CBS News and shows Obama and Governor Christie greeting victims, comforting residents, and touring the damage together.

Tone

In searching for Obama's tweets, I noticed that there was a lack of content about Hurricane Sandy on the POTUS44 account. However, there were tweets on his personal account, @BarrackObama.

Figure 4

Obama Tweet



In this tweet, Obama seems to be leaning toward a nation-centered approach in which he calls for the American people to “pull together” instead of focusing on divisive political issues. Aside from this, most of the tweets regarding the hurricane focused on relaying information to people who were affected.

The lack of tweets regarding the hurricane could be due to a multitude of reasons. This era of social media was the start of politicians using it as a tool in their campaigns and during their tenure. The lack of response on Twitter could be attributed to the fact that social media was still a relatively new form of communication. Instead, Obama focused on official channels like press releases, briefings, and official statements from the White House.

On November 15, 2012, the White House released a press release outlining Obama's second visit to the affected areas of Hurricane Sandy. In this, they detailed the steps that Obama

delivered in attempting to provide relief. They briefly discussed the numbers like amounts of money provided and number of personnel deployed, but a lot of the focus remained on collaborative efforts among different agencies and levels of government. While FEMA was still a huge part of the relief efforts, “ additional federal partners are also taking steps to support the Governors, Mayors and other local officials as they identify longer term priorities to help communities rebuild and recover” (Obama White House Archives, 2012). This press release serves as a way to assess not only the promises Obama made at the start of the disaster, but to also determine if he is still focusing on a nation-building approach. By making specific notes on how several different organizations are involved on both the federal and local level, politicians are working alongside one another, and how they plan to support the citizens of the affected areas, Obama and the Official White house are able to produce a tone that exudes hope and calls on bipartisanship context.

Metaphors and simplifying models

The press release I chose for Obama put significant focus on supporting state and local governments, partners, and other organizations. This is a major model that is used to position the Obama Administration as one that is there to provide the help that lower forms of government need to be successful at their task of rebuilding. This is interesting because it takes away focus from the political realm of things for Obama. There is no talk about him other than what he is doing to support other people. It seems this was a tactical choice to remove the idea of political gain from the discourse surrounding the hurricane.

Context

The bipartisanship context was also a major frame for Obama. The White House released the photo shown above, making note of how Obama was working alongside the Republican

governor Chris Christie. Referring back to Figure 4, Obama originally called upon America using cultural contexts like patriotism and American values to frame the issue as something the country should be taking on together. This brings the issue to a broader audience, namely those who rely on and strongly believe in American patriotism. By framing the issue this way, more people are likely to support Obama's efforts because his main message revolved around bringing America together.

Figure 5

Obama and Gov. Christie speaking to those affected by the hurricane



Photo by Pete Souza

The White House emphasized this by ensuring the photos they released matched the narrative Obama was putting out. Figure 5 shows Obama working alongside Governor Christie. While a lot of the photos pictured above show Obama's readiness to comfort people, a lot of the

photos also gave a specific nod to his work with people who may be considered political opposition.

This is an important and interesting narrative because, outside of Hurricane Sandy, Governor Christie and Obama did not share very much in common when it came to politics. Even after the disaster, Christie continued to share several grievances that he had with Obama and his administration. The divisiveness of politics can even be seen through various reactions to a photo of Obama and Christie “hugging.” While many claimed the photo in Figure 6 was a hug, Christie would later defend himself and his actions toward Obama during Hurricane Sandy.

Figure 6

Obama greeted by Governor Christie



Photo by Jewel Samad

During the disaster, Christie praised Obama for his efforts in providing relief, saying “It’s been a great working relationship to make sure that we’re doing the jobs that people elected us to do. And I cannot thank the president enough for his personal concern and compassion for our state and for the people of our state” (CBS News, 2012). Despite this, he was later adamant that the picture above should not be considered a hug and “defended his post-Sandy actions while distancing himself from Obama’s policies during a town hall in June 2013” (Reily, 2016, para. 7).

Trump

Numbers

Hurricane Dorian was the strongest and most destructive storm of the 2019 hurricane season (National Weather Service, 2020). “The northern Bahamas, the Abaco Islands, and Grand Bahama Island were devastated by Dorian's category five winds” (National Weather Service, 2020, para. 1). Dorian then slowly weakened to category two strength as it moved toward Florida, South Carolina, and North Carolina (National Weather Service, 2020). The hurricane cost the Bahamas around \$3.4 billion (Inter-American Development Bank, 2019). Florida governor Ron Desantis declared a state of emergency followed a day later with President Trump making the same declaration on the federal level (Fritze & King, 2019). The hurricane caused 67 deaths, “with 282 persons still missing as of 18 October 2019. An additional 29,472 persons were affected by the hurricane by damages to their homes and assets” (Inter-American Development Bank, 2019, para. 3). Contrary to other presidents, Trump did not visit the areas affected by the hurricane. This can be attributed to the fact that the main victims of Hurricane Dorian resided in the Bahamas, and as such, it is not as expected of him to visit the area. This is an important distinction, though.

Messengers

In the case of Hurricane Dorian, Trump and the White House are primary messengers alongside the news and other organizations like FEMA. However, in Trump's case, which differs from the others I examine in this paper, he takes a lead on communication without consulting other important organizations. Confusion ensued as he tweeted information that was not entirely accurate regarding the path of Hurricane Dorian.

Figure 7

Trump Tweets



Shortly after, the Birmingham National Weather Service tweeted out a correction to Trump's statement, saying Alabama will not see any damage from Hurricane Dorian. As the news began to talk about his coverage of the hurricane, things escalated, very quickly turning into a back-and-forth Twitter battle to prove himself right (Law & Martinez, 2019). He claimed the news was fixating on his attempts to do so.

Since Trump, functioning as a main messenger, was primarily focused on maintaining his image and fighting accusations of being misinformed, the messages about the hurricane reflected

this. Where other presidents set a specific focus like rebuilding or bipartisanship efforts, Trump's focus was on maintaining his image and message that the news was "fake news" and that people should not trust what they were reporting. This can be shown from my search for footage of Trump from a news media outlet. Since he did not visit an affected area, there was no footage from that aspect. The void was instead filled with his fight to prove himself. When the parameters for my search were input, most of the coverage revolved around his use of incorrect information and old maps.

Figure 8

Trump Tweets



Visuals

The photos available on the Trump White House Archive reflect Trump's attempts to clear his name and prove his knowledge on the hurricane. Both sets of photos released are from briefings that show Trump receiving news from organizations like FEMA. Contrasted with images from other presidents, the difference is clear. Where other presidents have chosen to release photos of them on the scene of the disaster, the Trump White House Administration only

used photos of briefings. This again can be attributed to the fact that Trump never visited an affected area but is an important finding nevertheless. His focus on the damage toward the United States is apparent beyond his Tweets. During some of the briefings, as seen in Figure 10, Trump is pictured wearing a “USA” hat, signaling his priorities remain there.

Figure 9

Trump receives briefing from FEMA

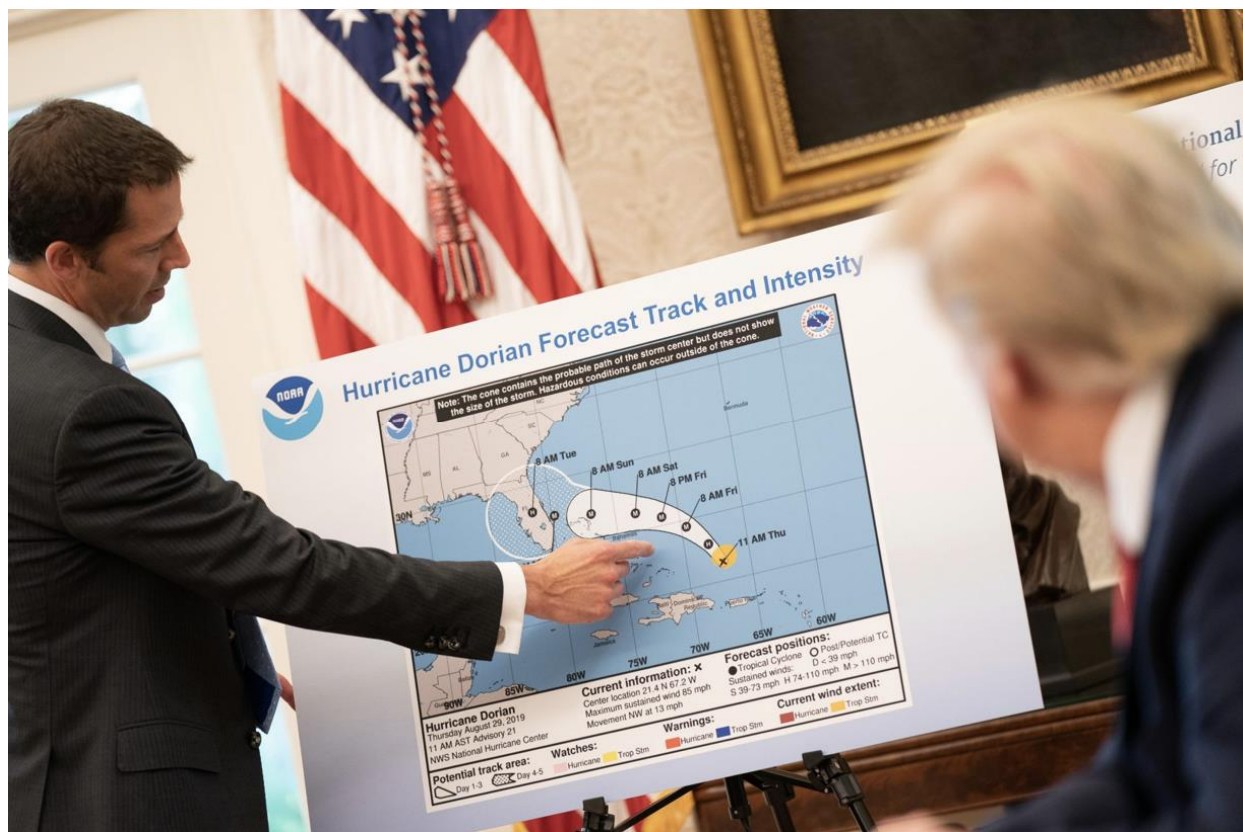


Photo by Shealah Craighead

Figure 10

Trump and Florida senator Rick Scott in FEMA briefing



Photo by Shealah Craighead

Tone

Most of the press releases regarding Hurricane Dorian were about emergency declarations the president made for certain states. Searching through the Trump White House Archives does not yield any overview or updates. This could be partially because Trump did not visit the affected areas, so there were not any updates to give on that front. There were quite a few different speeches given by the president during this time, though. In one of these, he claimed “What’s going on over there is incredible. Few people have seen anything like that, although, I must tell you, over the years, there have been some hurricanes that were bigger and stronger and more powerful that hit us very hard also” (The Trump White House Archives, 2019). He also spent a lot of time speaking about how multiple states got “lucky” and reiterated that the hurricane changed paths from what was originally predicted.

Metaphors and simplifying models

The models and rhetoric Trump used surrounding this disaster made his priorities clear. After showing his concern for those in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina (as seen in the Tweet from Figure 7), Trump dismissed the idea of allowing Bahamians into the United States for refuge from the Hurricane. He justified his line of thought by saying “some very bad people and some very bad gang members and some very, very bad drug dealers” would be entering the country (Chuck & Ainsley, 2019). This is an example of a simplifying model, using a broad descriptor for a large group to help people see things in a certain light.

Context

The social and political context surrounding Trump’s presidency is important to consider here. While others drew on a bipartisanship context, Trump chose to illuminate the tension between himself and the media. This tension had been present since his campaign cycle, characterized by “regular conflicts between Donald Trump and the news media” and continued well into his presidency (Barthell et al., 2017, para. 1). According to the Pew Research Center, most people “feel the relationship is unhealthy and that the ongoing tensions are impeding Americans’ access to important political news” (Barthell et al., 2017, para. 2). With this context in mind, it is important to understand that this relationship impacted the flow of information regarding the hurricane.

Biden

Numbers

On the morning of September 27, 2022, Hurricane Ian hit western Cuba as a category 3 hurricane (National Weather Service, 2022). Since this disaster has occurred so recently, there is not an exact number on a budget yet. It may take years to calculate the true damage, but

“preliminary property damage estimates for Ian so far range from \$42 billion to as much as \$258 billion” (Rose, 2020, para. 1). Many different states’ governors declared a state of emergency for this hurricane. President Biden also issued a declaration for Florida and eventually North Carolina (The White House, 2022). Based on multiple different reports, NBC estimated Ian has caused 148 deaths (Schuppe et al., 2022). Furthermore, about “ 2.7 million customers were in the dark at peak outage in Florida,” about 25 percent of the whole state (Livingston, 2022, para. 10).

Messengers

By this time, the POTUS Twitter account was something that presidents were expected to use in the dissemination of information. This allowed Biden to take an even bigger role as primary messenger. It should be noted that Biden’s account is the most recent and therefore is the easiest to access. There were multiple tweets from the active POTUS account that I was able to pull. As with the other cases, the news still plays a major role as well. In this case, the messenger I have chosen to represent the news media’s expression of the disaster is NBC. This was the first video coverage that came up in searching for Biden’s visit to damaged areas after Hurricane Ian. The segment was titled “Biden meets with DeSantis while surveying Hurricane Ian.” The title alone is very interesting because of its immediate mention of an oppositional political figure and use of the bipartisan context. Furthermore, DeSantis himself acts as a messenger in this case, sending the same message: he is working with Biden, setting aside politics for the greater good.

Visuals

The NBC news segment acknowledged that the damage done by the hurricane cannot be repaired in a simple visit or statement from the president. They went on to say the people affected by the disaster are “receiving assurances,” followed by images of construction

equipment clearing out damaged areas. While most of the things they showed video of involved the destruction, they did have a very clear shot of work already being done to help rebuild the communities affected by Ian.

Tone

Figure 11

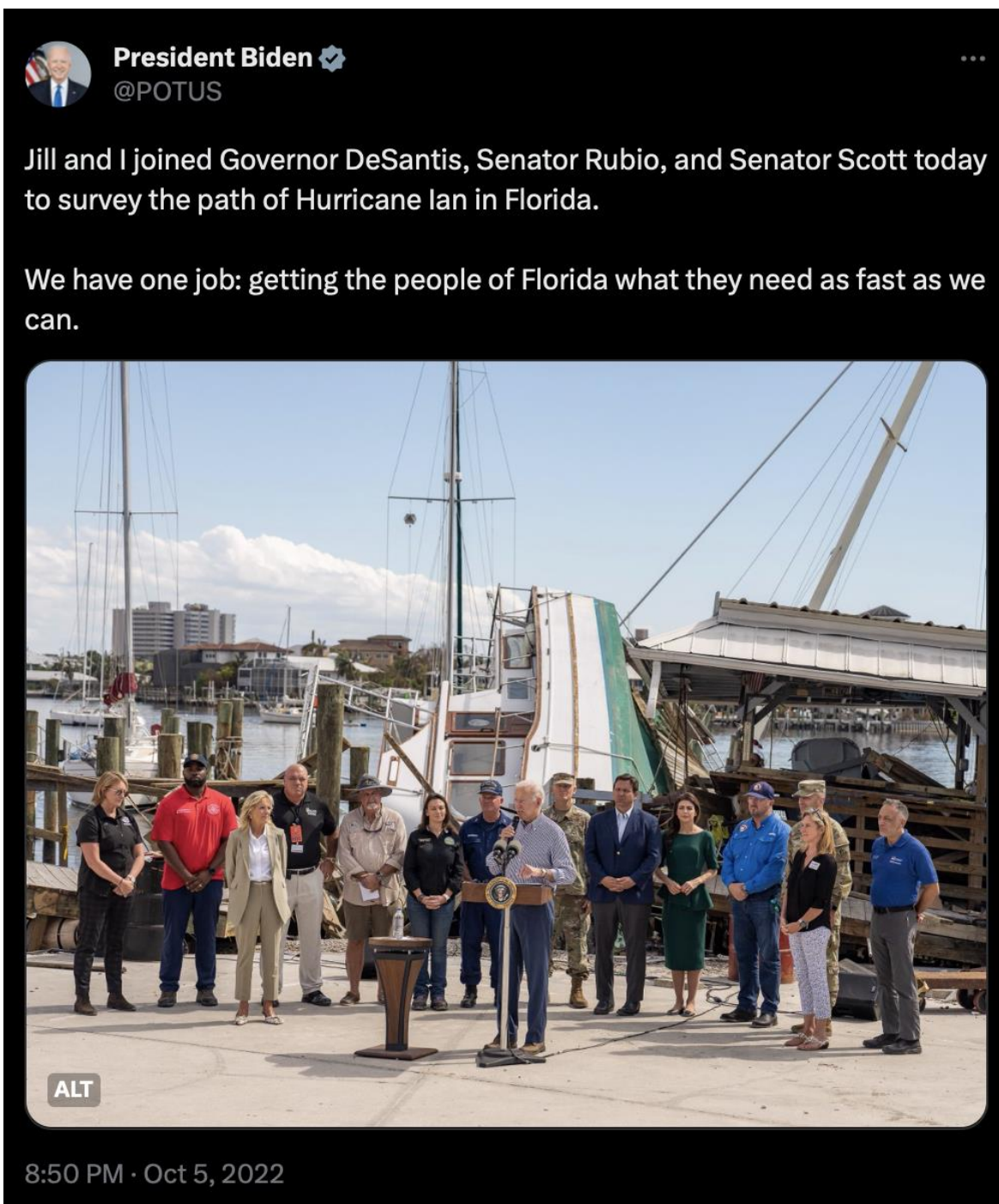
Biden Tweets



With a bipartisanship context, Biden is able to position himself in a more favorable position with Republicans. As a Democrat, he likely experiences more scrutiny from the right, but in positioning himself as an ally and teammate with Ron DeSantis, Florida's Republican governor, he makes his image more advantageous in the eyes of conservative Americans.

Figure 12

Biden Tweets



Metaphors and simplifying models

In the news video chosen, Desantis is shown giving an address alongside Biden. In this, he says he and Biden are “cutting through the bureaucracy” (NBC News, 2022). This is a form of metaphor that a primary messenger in this case has employed to help people understand a certain

concept. In this case, the concept Desantis is pushing forward to the audience is the idea of moving beyond political differences and institutions that might normally disagree. While Desantis could have used a variety of metaphors, he chose one that focused on the bipartisanship context that Biden initially set for the disaster. This follows the same path that the media took in this case: echoing the sentiments originally set by the primary messenger in the hurricane. Biden also took an “America first” approach in some speeches, again focusing on how politics should not play a role in their efforts to deliver hurricane relief.

Context

The media seemed to follow the bipartisanship context, with a large portion of major outlets talking about Biden’s partnership with DeSantis. The bipartisanship efforts in this disaster are interesting because of the levels of polarization in the United States. There has been a steady increase in polarization among voters and politicians, peaking during Trump’s presidency and barely moving down since (Murray & Marquez, 2023). This alone could contribute to the abundance of focus on bipartisanship. When it tends to be extraordinarily low, it becomes newsworthy when two very oppositional political figures come together to put politics aside and help their people.

Discussion

Based on the findings from my research, certain elements emerge in their importance for crafting a federal-level message during a crisis like a hurricane. First and foremost, it is important for the president to cement himself, or herself, as the primary messenger as early as possible. By getting in front of the crisis, a messenger is able to position themselves much more positively because they have more control over the narrative. Furthermore, when crafting a

message, key elements should include a focus on the people affected and make note of the president's ability to work with those who are considered adversaries.

By working in a bipartisanship context, the president is able to not only extend some of the responsibility to other parties, he is also able to show the ability to move beyond politics in a time of need. This message is extremely important for people to hear in a time of crisis. When a bipartisan effort is laid out early in the crisis timeline, most of the other elements of the Strategic Advocacy Framework align with that. Most of the metaphors and simplifying models will follow the idea of togetherness, furthering the bipartisan context. When a different context is brought to the forefront of the discourse, like Trump's continuous and prolonged battle with the media throughout his term, the focus of the entire crisis revolves around that. This is not an effective means of crisis communication because there is very little information flow that pertains to the actual crisis; rather everything is focused on the context that is brought to light.

Obama and Biden's overall strategies seem to take on a similar approach. Most likely, a factor that contributed to this would be that they worked together for eight years as president and vice president respectively. Bush's case can also be considered somewhat of an outlier because of the sheer power and destruction from Hurricane Katrina. Similarly, Trump's response to Hurricane Dorian may also be considered an outlier because the primary messages, context, and even metaphors and simplifying models vary drastically from the other three presidents examined in this paper. Based on all of this information along with the elements of the Strategic Advocacy Framework, Obama took the most effective approach to hurricane crisis communication. Not only did he focus on work with other state and local agencies, he and his administration also emphasized that political gain was not a goal of his during his efforts to provide relief.

Limitations

One of the biggest limitations I faced in doing this research was access to the artifacts I was looking to assess each president with. When looking for both Bush's and Obama's news videos, I encountered multiple problems in the lack of content. Because each of these disasters is over ten years old, many of the videos created during the time were no longer available or playable. Furthermore, in Obama's case, his administration took a huge lead in keeping their position as primary messenger. Most of the news videos available for analysis came from the Obama White House Administration, which may add an element of bias to this area of research. Along these same lines, accessing Twitter and other social media for these two former presidents was much more difficult. I attempted to consult other forms of social media to account for the fact that Twitter did not exist at the time of Bush's presidency. However, it appears Bush did not start actively using a Facebook account until years after Hurricane Katrina. When Twitter did become a bigger part of politics, Hurricane Sandy had also already passed. Because of this, there was no POTUS Twitter account that each president currently possesses during their time in office. Obama did have a personal account that he used to Tweet about the disaster, but it was not nearly as saturated with information like Trump and Biden's Twitter accounts. Plus, since each of their hurricanes happened during the last five years, information is just much easier to access. The artifacts that I did analyze offered a lot of interesting findings, so if given more time, it would be beneficial to look at a larger variety. Analyzing more artifacts would not only offer more concrete evidence but may also help eliminate some discrepancies between each case. Even with these variations in artifacts, the analytical framework provided a useful means to assess the presidential response to a natural disaster in the form of a hurricane, and allows a consistent way to examine the different responses.

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