Public Relations Review 34 (2008) 359–366

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Public Relations Review

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

Kaye D. Sweetser[a,*], Charles W. Brown[b]

[a] Grady College, University of Georgia, Athens, GA 30602, United States
[b] U.S. Naval Air Forces, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 28 January 2008
Received in revised form 1 April 2008
Accepted 17 June 2008

Keywords:
Public affairs
Agenda building
Information subsidy

ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

☆ This campaign won a Public Relations Society of America Silver Anvil for excellence in government/crisis communication. U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Public Affairs collected the data with support from NAVCENT Reserve PA personnel and the Joint Public Affairs Support Element. During the operation, both authors were PA personnel at NAVCENT in Bahrain.

☆☆ The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document represent the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views or official position of the U.S. government, Department of Defense, Department of the Navy, or NAVCENT.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 706 542 2409.
E-mail addresses: sweetser@uga.edu (K.D. Sweetser), charles.w.brown2@navy.mil (C.W. Brown).

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doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2008.06.008

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

1. Literature

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Methods

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

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

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

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

Table 1
Frequency of talking points in media coverage

Talking point	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Statistics/number of Americans evacuate	216	58.5
Military assisting with safe/orderly departure	163	44.2
Compared U.S. evacuation with other nations	97	26.3
Military supporting Embassy	68	18.4
Military moving quickly as possible	62	16.8
Dynamic situation could become more dangerous	60	16.3
Military doing everything it takes	50	13.6
Historical perspective of Marine involvement	40	10.8
U.S. European Command coordinated with Israel to move Americans through blockade	3	.8
U.S. Central Command/U.S. Naval Forces Central Command was not the military command who coordinated with Israel to move Americans through blockade	2	.5

Note: An item can have more than one talking point/topic present in it.

Table 2
Sources

Quoted or mentioned military source	Frequency	Percentage (%)
"Official" (unnamed)	89	24.1
Commander, Task Force 59	50	13.6
Servicemember assisting (not leadership)	47	12.7
Pentagon Spokesman	28	7.6
Ship leadership	28	7.6
Official statement	28	7.6
Commander, NAVCENT, VADM Walsh	27	7.3
NAVCENT Public Affairs	10	2.7
Public Affairs, 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit	8	2.2
Comander, Iwo Jima Expeditionary Strike Group	7	1.9

Note: An item can have more than one source present in it.

Again, the subsidy information is not inferred; rather, it came directly from public affairs personnel who managed the crisis.

2.1. Sample

Items published/broadcast 15 July–1 August, 2006 were collected ($N = 369$), which was the "news life" of the issue during which practitioners actively subsidized media. The article or TV segment served as the unit of analysis, and all items discussed the military's involvement in the evacuation in order to be considered. Items were collected from major, elite news organizations; wire services; clipping services; and news database searches on key words. Intercoder reliability (.86) was established through Holsti's formula[1] based on 10% of the units analyzed. Differences were reconciled.

2.2. Coding categories

Attribute categories were derived from official military public affairs guidance used by those involved. These attributes, commonly called talking points in practice, were provided by the military and not inferred or otherwise derived. The public affairs guidance, or the document outlining the attributes, contained message themes, talking points, and question/answer items; the general purpose of the document was to provide leadership and practitioners a consistent source of guidance and regularly updated facts on the military effort.

The talking points and themes from the public affairs guidance were used to create a series of "present/absent" dichotomously coded attribute categories regarding the military's participation. For example, there were informational talking points such as the statistic on numbers of Americans evacuated and thematic talking points communicating that the military was doing everything it could to safely evacuate the Americans in a dangerous environment. Additional attribute categories were added as themes emerged. See Table 1.

Military sources also served as information subsidies for reporters. Sources mentioned or quoted in an item were recorded in a similar dichotomous matter (see Table 2). Sources included leadership such as NAVCENT Commander Navy Vice Admiral Patrick Walsh who oversaw the entire operation; Marine Brigadier General Carl Jensen, whom Walsh placed in tactical control; and ship leadership. Public affairs sources included unnamed officials, the Pentagon Spokesperson, the NAVCENT public affairs officer and staff, the public affairs officer of a Marine unit on the scene, and press releases or statements. Finally,

[1] North, Holsti, Zaninovich, and Zinnes (1963): $R = 2(C_{1,2})/C_1 + C_2$. $C_{1,2}$ = # of category assignments both coders agree on $C_1 + C_2$ = total category assignments made by both coders. Formula modified for additional coders.

servicemembers not in leadership roles – everyday Sailors assisting with the evacuations – were also coded as either having a quote present or absent in each item.

With public affairs-granted access and information subsidies being an important component of this study, each unit was coded for the level of access the reporter had when producing that item. This access categorization was based on whether the reporter went through the official public affairs channels to request information/interview or embedding with the evacuation teams. This access level is not assumed simply because of a quote, rather it is determined from the record of access actually used in generating the story. Access was coded as a dichotomous (present/absent) variable, as it is possible that a reporter might use several modes of access to produce a story:

- *Synchronous mediated access to headquarter public affairs* (Access 1): telephone or satellite video interview with practitioners at off-site headquarters, NAVCENT, in Bahrain.
- *Synchronous mediated access to on-scene public affairs* (Access 2): telephone or satellite video interview with practitioners on-scene in Cyprus.
- *Synchronous mediated access to headquarters commander* (Access 3): telephone or video interview with leadership at off-site headquarters.
- *Synchronous mediated access to on-scene personnel* (Access 4): telephone or video interview with commanders, other personnel participating in evacuation in Cyprus or aboard ship.
- *Direct access to person in Beirut or Cyprus* (Access 5): face-to-face interview with evacuated American or evacuation team member in Beirut or Cyprus; journalist reporting from these locations.
- *Direct access to personnel at sea* (Access 6): face-to-face interview with military personnel on ship assisting with evacuation or American being evacuated; journalist "embedded" on ship for transit.

Additionally, overall tone (negative, neutral, or positive) of the article was determined. Items that only provided factual or balanced accounts of the evacuation regarding the military were coded as "neutral." Items that carried more positive messages about the military regarding the evacuation (military coming to the rescue, military saving Americans) were coded as positive. Those that contained more negative messages about the military regarding the evacuation (military slow to respond, military not doing enough) were coded as negative.

- RQ1: Was there a transfer of salience of the public-affairs defined issue attributes into media coverage?
- RQ2: What is the relationship between issue attributes and tone?
- RQ3: What is the relationship between issue attributes and sources?
- RQ4: What impact did the level of media access have on coverage of the crisis?

3. Results

The items analyzed here ($N = 369$) were published during the height of the evacuation of American citizens from Lebanon. The majority of the coverage included print articles ($n = 320$), rather than broadcast video ($n = 49$). It is important to note that text stories (non-video) retrieved from a broadcast media outlet's Web site were coded as "print," as this source type classification referred to the mode (printed text or broadcast video) of the item rather than the source's primary means of reporting. For example, a text story on CNN.com was coded as "print" but a video from the same outlet would be coded as "video."

3.1. Attributes

In answering RQ1, which asked if there was a transfer of salience of the public-affairs defined issue attributes into media coverage, the presence of the military's official talking points was examined in each item. The greatest subsidy the media garnered from practitioners was the updated statistic on the number of Americans evacuated from Lebanon ($n = 216$; 58.5%). This information was made available through the organization's Web site or through synchronous mediated access to headquarter personnel (on-scene personnel did not maintain the official count). Other talking points/topics the media covered regularly included: military in Lebanon to provide Americans safe and orderly departure, and comparing the U.S. evacuation efforts/success with other nations' efforts (see Table 1).

A new variable measuring the total number of talking points was computed for additional statistical analyses. To create this summative talking point index, the talking points that were derived from the public affairs guidance were computed: military in Lebanon to provide safe and orderly departure for Americans, military acting in a supporting role the U.S. Embassy, military moving at best speed to move Americans out of Lebanon as quickly as possible, force protection was important but evacuation of Americans was priority, situation in Lebanon could change quickly and become more dangerous for Americans, NAVCENT/CENTCOM did not coordinate with Israel to ensure safe evacuation, EUCOM coordinated with Israel to ensure safe evacuation, and statistics of number of Americans military assisted out of Lebanon. A score of this new computed talking point interval variable could range from 0 talking points present to 8 talking points present in each unit. Overall, the mean score for the number of talking points per unit was 1.69 (S.D. = 1.38) across both types of coverage.

An independent samples *t*-test was run on this index to compare the number of talking points present in print and video coverage. Video coverage contained a statistically significant greater number of talking points (2.36) than print (1.58) items, $t(367) = -3.73$, $p \leq .001$.

Based on the data presented above, RQ1 is answered in that several official talking points were present in the media coverage. The importance of Americans safe transport and statistics regarding the number of Americans were among the most salient talking points transferred to media, and video coverage contained significantly more talking points than printed text.

3.2. Tone

Overall, tone was neutral to positive in the media's coverage of the military assistance to Americans leaving Lebanon. There were 32 negative items, 149 neutral items, and 131 positive items. Some items did not discuss the military ($n = 57$) and therefore tone was not determined for these items.

Next, the relationship between the talking point issue attributes and tone was examined in order to answer RQ2. χ^2-Tests were run separately on each talking point to determine the changes in tone of the military's effort when talking points were present. Only three talking points reached statistical significance. Coverage that compared the U.S. evacuation efforts to other nations was more likely to be neutral (52.3%) than positive (26.1%) or negative (21.6%), $\chi^2(2) = 23.21$, $p \leq .001$. Coverage painting the Lebanon situation as dynamic with the possibility to change anytime and become more dangerous was more likely to be neutral (49.1%) than positive (30.9%) or negative (20.0%), $\chi^2(2) = 8.15$, $p \leq .05$. Items containing the most compassionate talking point that force protection was important but that the military would do anything possible to safely evacuate Americans was more likely to be positive (60.3%) than neutral (30.6%) or negative (6.1), $\chi^2(2) = 10.81$, $p \leq .005$.

As such, the findings above for RQ2 indicate that the talking points suggesting that the military would do anything needed to conduct the evacuation of Americans was found to receive the most positive coverage in the media. Rather than focus on the military operation, the coverage centered on the dynamic situation of moving Americans from a war zone, discussing the number moved and highlighting the military's desire to move them safely out of Lebanon. Overall, there was a relationship between talking points and tone and it appeared that the media were more likely to frame practitioners' talking points neutrally.

3.3. Sources

To answer RQ3 about the relationship between issue attributes and sources, the subsidy of source was examined in each item. Military personnel were made available to the media throughout the crisis and often quoted discussing the military efforts in the evacuation. These personnel were located in the NAVCENT headquarters in Bahrain, on-scene in Cyprus or Beirut, and aboard ships at sea transporting Americans to Cyprus. Embarked media had a greater opportunity to interview servicemembers participating in the evacuation (non-leadership) or hear personal stories from evacuees who discussed servicemembers. Table 2 shows the frequency with which the various sources that were coded appeared in the media's coverage. Overall, the military was not cited as a primary source of information.

The computed talking point index was examined individually through independent samples *t*-tests for each of the military sources analyzed here. As previously reported, the baseline mean number of talking points was 1.69. When military sources were quoted in the article, the mean number of talking points increased at a statistically significant rate for all sources except mention of an official press release/statement or servicemember assisting. Table 3 outlines the differences in the number of talking points present in articles that quote military sources.

To further explore this relationship between the subsidy of a source and talking points, a linear regression (forward) with the computed talking point index as the dependent variable and the individual dummy spokesperson variables as independent predictor variables. Items produced by "internal" media agencies (Pentagon News Channel, Navy News Service, etc.) were excluded because such internal agencies have inherent access. The results indicated a positive, linear relationship at a statistically significant level, $F(4, 332) = 39.70$, $p \leq .001$. The model showed that number of talking points in an item could

Table 3
Change in number of talking points in media coverage

Quoted or mentioned military source	Change score	Mean # TPs when not quoted	Mean # TPs when quoted	Sig	*t*
VADM Patrick Walsh, Commander, NAVCENT	+1.82	1.55	3.37	.001	.37
NAVCENT PA	+1.45	1.65	3.10	.001	2.65
Commander, Task Force 59	+1.20	1.52	2.72	.001	4.58
Pentagon Spokesman	+1.06	1.61	2.67	.001	.09
Commander, Iwo Jima ESG	+1.04	1.67	2.71	.05	.71
PAO, 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit	+.95	1.67	2.62	.05	.005
Ship leadership	+.69	1.63	2.32	.05	1.17
"Official"	+.68	1.52	2.20	.001	3.51
Official statement	+.10	1.68	1.78	.70	.33
Servicemember assisting	−.09	1.70	1.61	.69	5.05

Table 4
Model for access predicting positive tone in media coverage

	B	S.E.	Exp(B)	95.0% C.I. for EXP(B)	
				Lower	Upper
Access 2	.995*	.452	2.705	1.116	6.557
Access 4	2.015**	.398	7.500	3.441	16.346
Access 6	1.831**	.343	6.242	3.187	12.227
Constant	−1.229	.180	.293		

* Significant at .05 level.
** Significant at .01 level.

be predicted by (in order): HQ commander Walsh, on-scene commander Jensen, "official" unnamed military source, and ship leadership. The other variables were not predictors. This model explained 24.8% of the variance in predicting the number of talking points in an item ($\beta = .12$).

In summary, RQ3 was answered in finding sources were successful in communicating the organization's viewpoint when interviewed for news items, items with military sources had more practitioner-defined attributes than those that did not quote sources, and commanders (at headquarters and on scene) as sources were strong predictors of the number of attributes for which salience is transferred to the media.

3.4. Access

Finally, this study sought to determine the impact of media access on the coverage of the crisis, as asked in RQ4. In answering this question, various regression analyses were performed. As in the previous regression, items produced by "internal" media agencies were excluded. Because tone is an often-studied variable in attribute agenda setting research, this study sought to examine how variables such as access could predict a "positive" tone. A dummy variable for "positivity" of item was created where items that were previously coded as "positive" in the categorical classification of tone were recoded to 1 and neutral or negative items were coded as 0.

Since the criterion variable ("positivity") is dichotomous, a backward logistic regression analysis was adopted. After the step-wise eliminations of the terms in the model, only three items (i.e., Access 2, Access 4, and Access 6) remained (see Table 4). The global test of the model coefficient showed that the model had a good fit [$\chi^2(3) = 65.91$, $p = .000$]. The nonsignificant Hosmer-Lemeshow test of goodness-of-fit also confirmed that the predicted probabilities by the model matched well the observed probabilities [$\chi^2(3) = .249$, $p = .969$]. The Nagelkerke R^2 indicated that the three-item model accounted for 28.2% of the total variance in the outcome variable. And the model's prediction ability was acceptable as its overall correct prediction rate scored 73.7%. The Wald tests reported that all the items in the model were statistically significant [Access 2: $z^2 = 4.855$, $p = .028$, Access 4: $z^2 = 25.694$, $p = .000$, Access 6: $z^2 = 28.501$, $p = .000$]. With the presence of Access 2, the odds of receiving a positive "tone" were estimated to be 2.7 times than with the absence of it, controlling for other variables in the model. The presence of Access 4 and Access 6 were 7.5, and 6.2 times more likely to get positive "tone," respectively, with keeping other variables constant.

Next, we tested whether the previous model predicting positivity would strengthen by considering the number of talking points in media coverage or an operational variable such as the number of people evacuated (see Table 5). In order to test these questions, we employed logistic regressions analyses, two independent variables (number of talking points and number of people evacuated) were added separately with the forced entry method to the established three-item model (i.e., the model that includes three access items as independent variables and "tone" as dependent variable). Before the data entry, the unit of the number of talking points was adjusted to 1000. The likelihood-ratio statistics associated with entering the number of talking points [$\chi^2(1) = 12.2$, $p < .000$] and the number of people evacuated [$\chi^2(1) = 12.4$, $p < .000$] indicated statistically significant effects of the two variables on the criterion variable. The final model with five items (i.e., Access 2, Access 4, Access 6, number of talking points, and number of people evacuated) was acceptable as evidenced by a significant global test of model fit [$\chi^2(5) = 90.49$, $p = .000$] and a nonsignificant Hosmer-Lemeshow test of goodness-of-fit [$\chi^2(8) = 12.71$, $p = .122$]. The Nagelkerke R^2 indicated that this model explained 37.2% of the total variance in the outcome variable. The model's

Table 5
Model for access and operational factors predicting positive tone in media coverage

	B	S.E.	Exp(B)	95.0% C.I.for EXP(B)	
				Lower	Upper
Access 2	.798	.484	2.221	.860	5.734
Access 4	2.082	.419	8.023	3.530	18.232
Access 6	1.683	.355	5.379	2.683	10.783
Number of talking points	.454	.133	1.575	1.213	2.045
Number of people evacuated (in 1,000)	.144	.032	1.155	1.085	1.230
Constant	−2.976	.462	.051		

Table 6
Model for access predicting number of talking points present in media coverage

Model	Unstandardized coefficients		95% Confidence interval for B	
	B	Standard error	Lower bound	Upper bound
(Constant)	1.339	.081	1.179	1.500
Access 1	.669	.164	.346	.992
Access 3	1.729	.246	1.245	2.213

prediction ability was acceptable with the 74% rate of correct prediction. The Wald statistics displayed that all the items in the model except the variable of Access 2 were significant at the .01 level in predicting the tone [Access 2: $z^2 = 2.72$, $p = .099$, Access 4: $z^2 = 26.46$, $p = .000$, Access 6: $z^2 = 24.11$, $p = .000$, the number of people evacuated: $z^2 = 20.37$, $p = .000$, the number of talking point: $z^2 = 11.62$, $p = .001$]. The presence of Access 4 and Access 6 were 8 and 5.4 times more likely to receive a positive "tone," respectively. As the number of people evacuated increases by 1000, the odds of receiving a positive "tone" was raised by 1.2 factors. Finally, for a unit change in the number of talking points, the odds of obtaining a positive "tone" increased by 1.6 factors.

A multiple regression analysis with the number of talking points as the dependent variable and all access variables as the independent variables was conducted (see Table 6). The backward regression method retained two independent variables (Access 1 and Access 3). The overall strength of relationship between the two independent variables and the outcome variable, which was reflected in the model R^2 of .163, was statistically significant at the .01 level [$F(2, 334) = 32.57$, $p = .000$]. The adjusted R^2 showed 15.8% of the variance in the number of talking points was accounted for by Access 1 and Access 3. The effects of the individual independent variables on the number of talking points are summarized in Table 6. The effects of Access 1 and Access 3 on the outcome variable were significant at the .05 level [Access 1: $t = 4.072$, $p = .000$, Access 3: $t = 7.032$, $p = .000$]. A unit change in Access 1 was associated with an estimated increase of the number of talking points by .7 point, controlling for Access 3. For every unit change in Access 3, controlling for Access 1, the number of talking points increased by 1.7 points. If the common rule-of-thumb threshold of practical importance for a dichotomous variable is roughly .3 times the standard deviation of the outcome variable, comparing the interval for Access 3 with the threshold showed that the effect of the variable on the outcome variable was practically important. However, the comparison of the threshold with the interval for Access 1 was not of practical importance.

To summarize the findings for RQ4, giving the media access to HQ staff (commander and public affairs) resulted in more successfully communicating talking points, but access to on-scene personnel resulted in more positive coverage. Additionally, successful operations (more people evacuated) increases likelihood of positivity.

4. Discussion

The evidence here supported the previously examined idea that practitioners play a role in shaping media coverage when they provide information subsidies. We add to scholarship in this area by investigating the role of access. These data underscore the importance of agenda building in terms of the positive outcomes resulting from responding to media inquiries, making key personnel available for interviews, and providing access to reporters to investigate the situation first-hand during crisis events.

While some practitioners may feel getting the organization's message to the media accounts for the most success in telling an organization's story, our findings suggest there is more to crisis communication than talking points and instructional information. The data clearly show that providing media with access to the on-scene personnel results in more positive coverage than transferring attribute salience. This is true not only considering the predictive relationship between access and tone, but the fact that more talking points appear in video coverage that actually shows the effort rather than print. Considering Coombs' (1999) findings regarding instructional and compassionate messages, here those evacuated were able to communicate compassion, allowing the organization to focus on communicating instructional information, which enabled both of these important messages to transfer into coverage.

Items with more talking points were generally neutral. Regression revealed that synchronous mediated access both to the commander and spokespeople at the HQ predicted coverage which included more talking points, but such high-level HQ access did not significantly predict more positive tone. Conversely, access, both direct and synchronous mediated, to actual participants in the evacuation predicted more positive tone, but not talking points. This suggests that while the inclusion of organizational messages in coverage may reflect effective communication of the organization's perspective of a crisis, improving media access to the organization's effort itself and those participating in that effort results in more positive coverage.

For the practitioner, these results suggest that the weight of communication effort in a crisis must be balanced between producing information subsidies and facilitating access to the organization's direct response. The challenge in achieving this balance is significant—beyond the constrained time and resources that are inherent to a crisis, there may be institutional resistance to providing more transparency during less predictable circumstances. This study, however, demonstrates the value of that transparency in the communication effort.

Increasing access to the organization's direct responders may require practitioners to yield some predictability of message content in order to achieve greater resonance. For instance, while access to the Sailors assisting in the evacuation did not translate into additional talking points (it had the opposite effect), it did impact tone. Similar to Downing's (2004) discovery that employee accounts during an unavoidable, catastrophic crisis can become a part of the story, these findings suggest that practitioners need not be afraid of empowering employees to speak to the media about their experiences. In fact, crisis communication planning should take into account the need to provide access to media so that potential opportunities can be identified, logistical challenges can be addressed, and courses of action can be prepared to achieve the most efficient and effective communication.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to extend their gratitude to YJ Sohn, the PA personnel who assisted, Steve Banning, and Taehyun Baek.

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