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Emergent Agents: The Forgotten Publics in Crisis Communication and Issues Management Research
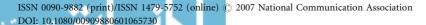
Damion Waymer & Robert L. Heath

Crisis communication research rarely highlights the voices of marginalized publics or their advocates whose interests are affected by crisis situations. We take a different approach by using a response to a natural disaster to expand our theorizing about crisis situations beyond those that hurt the bottom line. Using official statements from Senators Landrieu and Obama about events surrounding Hurricane Katrina as texts for analysis, we demonstrate how they used transcendence, rhetorically, and appropriated the Bush administration's key term—security—to garner more support for their positions, Katrina sufferers, and relief efforts. Implications of this strategy serve to broaden crisis communication theorizing, and to provide insights into ways to strengthen the quality of crisis emergency response planning and response protocols.

Keywords: Crisis Communication; Hurricane Katrina; Emergent Agents; Transcendence; Issues Management; Public Relations; Security

Many crises arise when key stakeholders are harmed by organizations' (in)actions, yet, in public relations and crisis communication research and literature, we rarely are exposed to the voices of many "forgotten" publics. Almost overwhelmingly, crisis communication research and literature, which are dominated by the managerial perspective, serve as a manual for ways that organizations can handle crises at hand, avoid legal sanctions and punitive damages, and address displeased publics. In such analyses, there is little or no attention to the voices of the affected publics, those whose interests are part or most of the reason why the subject organization is suffering a crisis and in need of responding to public and media inquiry. In this essay, we advance the view that crisis communication research, strategy, and responses will continue to be

Damion Waymer (Ph.D., Purdue University) is Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Houston. Robert L. Heath (Ph.D., University of Illinois) is Professor of Communication at the University of Houston. Correspondence to: Damion Waymer, University of Houston, School of Communication, 101 Communication Building, Houston, TX 77204, USA. E-mail: dwaymer@uh.edu

www.

deficient until the perspectives of the publics affected by the crises are taken into account fully. By focusing on these affected publics and their advocates, we hope to add both complexity and clarity to this literature by providing communication scholars with a lens through which to study the smaller nuances that surface when emergent agents' discourses are incorporated into the larger landscape of crisis situations.

In this document, we use the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina as the case for analysis. Specifically, we rhetorically analyze the discourses of U.S. Senators Mary Landrieu and Barrack Obama. We use their official statements, press releases, and Podcasts about the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina and the nation as texts for analysis. The Katrina crisis enabled these two individuals to emerge from the shadows of the Senate. This emergence, in turn, contributes further to the crisis challenges that the Bush administration faces.

We chose to focus on Senators Landrieu and Obama for the following reasons. First, we believe that many of their statements can be interpreted as representations of the feelings and opinions of many Katrina sufferers. Specifically, Senator Landrieu is an elected official who is supposed to represent the interests of her constituents. Second, we believe that statements from the two Senators helped procure larger sums of money for Katrina sufferers and restoration efforts from the Bush administration than would have been allocated if public utterances and actions were not in evidence. Third, their statements helped to ensure that funds allocated for Katrina sufferers and restoration efforts were not misappropriated or mishandled. Fourth, despite Mayor Nagin's being Louisiana's most animated and colorful advocate for Katrina suffers, Senator Landrieu's voice, from a national perspective, was likely to have a greater impact in the Senate and on the Bush administration than the Mayor's and those of most other Louisiana government officials. Moreover, due to her Democratic Party affiliation, Landrieu was likely to have more freedom in her speech and actions than Republican Louisiana Senator David Vitter when seeking funds and support for Louisiana's most vulnerable citizens.

In addition to the preceding reasons for choosing the two individuals noted, we chose to analyze Senator Obama's discourse because he is currently the only U.S. Senator of African descent. Since the federal government's slow response was to some an issue of race, Obama might have felt compelled to speak on behalf of the many black, voiceless faces, as well as appease his strong African-American constituency in Illinois. Obama, however, transcended racial issues in his discourse. In our view, Senator Obama's discourse and his physical location (in a Midwest state) helped to shift discussions about Katrina from a terrible disaster affecting some citizens in the South to a national conversation. To illustrate this point further, take into account that Chicago is a Midwestern city that experiences snow and occasional tornados; however, it is not likely to experience the mass destructiveness of a Category 5 hurricane or an earthquake registering 8 on the Richter Scale. Thus, Obama's discourse reminds us that the discussions surrounding Katrina should not fade into conversations that frame these events as a Ray Nagin and New Orleans issue or a Louisiana problem; these conversations should be national in scope and should address national safety and security.

By displaying transcendence and discovering common ground in what might be, might otherwise become, or might already have been perceived as a polarized issue of race, Senators Landrieu and Obama sagely responded to this national disaster by cleverly appropriating the administration's favored term "security" in their discourse. In this essay, we show how Senators Landrieu and Obama appropriated and stretched the traditional dividing lines in such a way that the term resonated with public sentiments about the government's responsibility to its citizens. Simply put, our analysis demonstrates ways that the rhetorical strategy of transcendence can be used by affected publics and their advocates to modify the narrative of being in control (see Heath, 1997) that the organizations experiencing the crises want to employ consistently. Moreover, our analysis reveals how a failure to respond to an initial crisis situation (silence or inadequate communication and action) can lead to a new crisis of organizational legitimacy.

We first establish the foundation from which to consider natural disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, as legitimate crisis situations by weaving together scholarly literature pertaining to natural disasters with communication literature that illustrates what counts as a crisis, as well as the manner in which crises threaten organizational legitimacy. Next, through a review of the crisis management literature, we identify what we consider to be the managerial bias in crisis communication research. We then establish the import of including the often overlooked publics' discourses and demonstrate how this managerial bias leads to deficient crisis management theories, strategies, and responses. We do this, in part, by analyzing selected texts from Senators Mary Landrieu and Barrack Obama. We conclude by drawing implications for the study of crisis communication, issues management, and public relations.

Natural Disasters as Crisis Communication Situations

Crises are predictable yet untimely events that have possible and/or actual consequences for the organization suffering the crisis, that organization's reputation, and its multiple publics, stakeholders, and their interests (Benoit, 1997; Brinson & Benoit, 1996; Coombs, 1995, 1999; Hearit, 1994; Heath, 1997; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 1998; Seeger & Ulmer, 2002). Conceptually, crises also are threats, "meaning that they actually do or have the potential to create negative or undesirable outcomes" (Coombs, 1999, p. 3). From these definitions and from works of other scholars (see Sellnow & Seeger, 2001), we feel that natural disasters can be considered bona fide crisis situations that need to be addressed and managed.

Many see natural disasters as what Lerbinger (1997) correctly noted as "acts of God." As such, one can define a crisis as a risk manifested—in the case of Katrina, the predictable wrath of Mother Nature. Such risks occur naturally, affect people and property, and pose challenges for individual, group, and organizational responsiveness. In a crisis analysis, the manifestation of risk—whether natural or not—might be a terrorist attack (e.g., 9/11), a murderer tampering with a product (Tylenol), or a hurricane (Katrina). Each different type of risk and crisis affects populations at

various magnitudes of severity. If we merely excuse relevant organizations that suffer a "natural crisis" as they are acts of God, it is logical to reason that the organization did not need to exhibit a more responsible use of control than it did. For instance, in the case of Katrina, such federal government claims as, "[N]o one in Washington willed or caused the storm nor knew that it would hit where it did or cause the damage that occurred," minimized the inadequacy of its response. This type of claim might suffice in crisis response, except for the issue of proper preparation and response made salient by the voices of people who were dramatically affected by the storm. They were not willing, and, in fact, not able to excuse government officials because they simply could not respond and recover by their own means. Thus, although a natural disaster typically is considered to be not the fault of an organization, the discourse surrounding Katrina contains potent indicators of stakeholder expectations of organizational responses to disaster; the failure of an adequate response precipitates a crisis.

Adequacy of Preparation

On Monday August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina—the sixth strongest storm ever recorded in the Atlantic basin—made landfall in Louisiana and Mississippi. Hurricane Katrina, with estimated damage costs between $70 billion and $130 billion, was the most expensive natural disaster in U.S. history. Millions of Gulf Coast residents encountered both forced evacuation and forced displacement as a result of this hurricane, but none were harmed to the magnitude of the citizens of New Orleans. Many lost lives, homes, and livelihood. Routines were dramatically disrupted, families torn apart, and futures threatened, including the possibility, even certainty, that many would never return to their homes.

The assumption that preparation could have been no better is largely hollow. Many knowledgeable voices predicted storms of this magnitude and the accompanying damage, as did producers of a National Geographic special. Discussing the natural, act of God, manifestation of risk as crisis, Lerbinger (1997) has reasoned: "Disasters caused by nature are considered 'acts of God' because they are generally uncontrollable and the public tends to accept them fatalistically" (p. 57). Nevertheless, Lerbinger (1997) emphasized how emergency management planning and response are important elements of a natural crisis and, therefore, the adequacy of the response. Those affected can well ask whether authorities took the proper measures to predict, avoid, and prepare to mitigate the damage, and respond to aid recovery.

In a similar vein, Seeger and Ulmer (2002) have observed: "For organizations, crisis represents a fundamental threat to the very stability of the system, a questioning of core assumptions and beliefs, and risk to high priority goals, including organizational image, legitimacy, profitably and ultimately survival" (p. 126). In this particular case, if multiple stakeholders believe that the federal government's preparation for this storm was inadequate, threats to its legitimacy and questions concerning its competence are likely to arise, as others have noted (Hearit, 1995, 1997; Sethi, 1977).

Hearit (1995) suggested that the first criterion—competence—must be satisfied for those responding to a crisis "to achieve and maintain legitimacy" (p. 2). In our view, the federal government's planning and initial response to the crisis posed by Katrina was inadequate, if not downright incompetent.

The analysis of Katrina can focus on planning and communication prior to a storm of that magnitude, the response during the manifestation of the risk (communication and emergency response), and the reaction following the storm (restoration and communication). This approach to crisis deals with three stages: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis. Millar and Heath (2004) featured this three-part approach and offered various best practices and research propositions to guide future research and crisis planning and response. Three of these principles guided the current research project:

(1) *Vigilant preparation (by self-reflective organizations) can reduce the likelihood of a crisis and increase the responsiveness of the organization to demonstrate its ability to establish control over its operations (Heath, 2004b, p. 35). (Pre-crisis)*

(2) *Researchers can investigate the types of narratives that are used to explain crises and the extent to which conflicting narratives divide some stakeholders from others in regard to the way in which each crisis is understood and evaluated (Heath, 2004c, p. 151). (Crisis)*

(3) *Communication results from the need for sense making, which is a collective co-created activity. Crisis creates rhetorical problems that demand that sense be made of decisions and events. The organization suffering the crisis is expected to understand and respond to the various kinds of sense that are being made. Savvy practitioners understand that stakeholders are capable of creating, and motivated to create, their own sense of the situation. Responses are likely to be more successful when they acknowledge the mutuality of sense making. (Heath, 2004a, 249). (Post-crisis)*

Adequacy of Response

Katrina demonstrated the relevance of these propositions and accompanying managerial and communication planning. One of the most dramatic, not to mention tragic, aspects of the storm was that early during the event looting received more attention than the dire health and safety issues inflicted on New Orleans's population, which could not respond well with the resources available. The city lacked a coordinated plan to help victims find shelter, and lacked communication infrastructures by which citizens could request help and report dire and emerging consequences of the storm's damage. Citizens often lacked transportation and financial resources to reduce the likelihood that they were in harm's way. To these stakeholders, their government was displaying behavior that threw its legitimacy into question.

Threats to organizational legitimacy occur when perceived responsibility and response are not congruent. Sethi (1977) referred to this disparity as the legitimacy gap. Moreover, organizations that "face social legitimacy crises due to exigencies that are a result of policies that interest groups charge to be unethical and irresponsible are viewed generally to have violated the values of honesty, responsibility, and/or self

control" (Hearit, 1995, p. 12). In addition to the crisis per se, these interest groups threaten an organization's legitimacy in myriad ways, including via legal suits and other social sanctions, such as boycotts, protests, and public outcry. In this case, public outcry was highly visible, as many people openly expressed their disgust with regard to the seemingly slow federal government response to this crisis. Because of the nature of the Katrina crisis, interest groups were likely to come from outside, if at all.

During the NBC Concert for Hurricane Relief, African-American rapper and entertainment artist Kanye West strayed from his teleprompter script and commented on what he perceived as racism on behalf of the government and media:

> I hate the way they portray us in the media. You see a black family, it says, "They're looting." You see a white family, it says, "They're looking for food." And, you know, it's been five days [waiting for federal help] because most of the people are black. . . . George Bush doesn't care about black people! (CBS News, 2005)

On a national stage, he questioned the slow response of the federal government and the stereotypical media portrayals of black sufferers in New Orleans. This sentiment, sternly expressed, puts government agencies into a crisis mode.

In a similar vein, Mayor Ray Nagin of New Orleans blasted the Governor of Louisiana, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Homeland Security, and even the President of the United States in his September 2, 2005 radio interview (CNN.com, 2005). In his interview, Nagin asserted that Hurricane Katrina was the largest crisis in the history of the United States; people were dying; long policy discussion of what to do and what not to do was not an option; and these agents and agencies needed to act immediately (CNN.com, 2005). Although a crisis situation existed for the aforementioned agents and agencies, the government in general, and the Bush administration in particular, were subject to the most criticism as a result of a commonly held belief that the federal government was responsible for protecting and overseeing the welfare of its citizens.

Typical of many other mainstream publications, *Newsweek* of September 19, 2005, featured on its cover the face of an African-American child with tears in her eyes. The cover contained the phrases "why Bush failed" and "children of the storm." The story was entitled "Poverty, Race, & Katrina: Lessons of a National Shame." In the days before and during the storm and for a few days after, the voices of the poor received substantial attention, but was the nation really listening? Through such coverage, the nation may hear the anguish as reflecting the symptoms of the crisis, but not as defining its antecedent conditions. To many, the Bush administration's hurricane relief response was too slow. Katrina, by unveiling rigid class divisions and by exposing the administration's carelessness, possibly its indifference in not heeding the warnings of the Army Corps of Engineers, opened the door to more criticism and added to the administration's own crisis.

The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, undoubtedly, resulted in a crisis for the federal government. We suspect that crisis communication research relating to Hurricane Katrina will focus primarily on the following questions: In what ways can agencies such as FEMA, the Department of Homeland Security, and those at the state

and local level responsible for crisis management best address such crises? We recognize that organizations such as FEMA, and other government agencies, including the White House, suffered and continue to suffer fallout from Katrina. We could focus on how well or poorly such organizations are reacting in deeds and words. This essay takes a different approach, however, because we feel that reflective, inclusive research that adequately includes the perspectives of stakeholders other than the organization experiencing a crisis or that has to manage it will enrich crisis communication theory and research as well as crisis response planning and protocols. Hearit and Courtright (2003) observed: "[A]ny crisis situation must take into account the rhetoric of other groups that have an effect on the ensuing discourse" (p. 92). Few researchers, however, have heeded this call. Thus, what we refer to as "managerial bias" persists in crisis communication research. This is the case because some victims are silent for many reasons; thus, to flesh out crisis communication theory, we need to ask how they achieve voice.

Managerial Bias in Crisis Communication Research

The public relations and crisis management literature has numerous examples of organizations that have turned perceived crisis failures into success stories; Benoit's (1995) analysis of the strategies Sears employed to restore its image is just one of them. Such organizations have been applauded or taken to task in the literature for the various ways in which they have responded to crises. To illustrate, Ulmer (2001) conducted a case study of Malden Mills, which had a fire classified as an industrial accident that "destroyed three critical manufacturing buildings and threatened to put 3,000 employees in a small manufacturing town out of work" (p. 591). In his article, Ulmer applauded Aaron Feurerstein, the owner and CEO of Malden Mills, for his efforts in the crisis the fire posed. By continuing to employ and pay local residents while he rebuilt the facilities and kept the company in the same town, he demonstrated how much he valued the local stakeholders. As a result, he became a hero to the residents. The CEO successfully turned this failure and crisis situation that threatened this community and his company's existence into a positive crisis management opportunity.

In 1984, Union Carbide found itself in the middle of one of history's iconic crisis situations when a deadly gas—killing more than 2,000 people and injuring thousands more—escaped from its plant located in Bhopal, India. Ice (1991) explored the role of rhetorical strategies in repairing damaged corporate relationships. The focus again was on management's response as the key to success. Even when communication scholars have explored crises in terms of such issues as race (see Brinson & Benoit, 1999; Williams & Olaniran, 2002) their focus has been to suggest strategies that may enable organizations to respond to such crises more effectively.

In the familiar Texaco case, for example, an executive recorded on tape other high-level executives in the organization using derogatory racial epithets to describe some of the African-American employees. The original image restoration strategy that Brinson and Benoit (1999) uncovered led to the conclusion that Texaco had used the

strategy of separation properly, and it was separation, in part, that had helped the company resolve the racial crisis effectively.

From our perspective, the generic managerial bias in studying crisis communication has promoted limited understanding. In short, the crisis communication literature is largely void of the other voices and views present in particular situations and the possible ways that these voices can influence public discourse and opinion. This exploration marks the beginning of a much needed expansion. It uses responses to a natural disaster, other than those commonly evidenced in the literature, to provide a more complete picture of what crisis communication entails.

Displaying Transcendence During a Crisis: A Means of Combating the Narratives of Continuity and Control

Crisis managers use communication as a tool to influence the framing of crisis events (Hearit, 1994; Heath, 1997). Because crises often threaten the well-being, lives, and interests of organizational stakeholders, a major goal of crisis managers is to strengthen and restore their relationships with key stakeholders who have been affected by crisis events. Hence, "When a crisis occurs, a spokesperson [for the organization deemed responsible] is expected to explain publicly and quickly why it happened and what will be done to correct operations and protect people from further harm as well as repay and comfort those who have been harmed" (Heath, 1997, p. 317).

In times of crisis, organizations use public relations tools, such as press conferences, press releases, and other forms of mediated communication, as the primary means to reach the goal of minimizing or reversing damage to relationships. They also make statements to enact control in the face of uncertainty and to frame crisis events by demonstrating that they influence their destinies (Heath, 1997). Although the narrative frame of an organization's being in control of its destiny is the one we often hear in crisis situations, there are other frames, at times competing ones, that support or circumvent a responsible party's story.

The very nature of crisis situations provides publics with the opportunity to challenge the frame that the organization is, in fact, in control of its destiny. Crises can provide individuals and publics that are not directly affected by a crisis situation with a platform from which to speak, and can possibly empower otherwise marginalized stakeholders and publics by equipping them with negotiation tools to enter into a dialogue. To illustrate this point further, we revisit statements made by New Orleans Mayor Nagin. In the same September 2, 2005 radio interview mentioned above, Mayor Nagin publicly criticized the Bush administration's seemingly slow response to his requests for assistance:

> We authorized $8 billion to go to Iraq lickety-quick. After 9/11, we gave the president unprecedented powers lickety-quick to take care of New York and other places. Now, you mean to tell me that a place where most of your oil is coming through, a place that is so unique when you mention New Orleans anywhere around the world, everybody's eyes light up—you mean to tell me that a place

> where you probably have thousands of people that have died and thousands more that are dying every day, that we can't figure out a way to authorize the resources that we need? Come on, man. (CBS News, 2005)

Through analysis of discourse of this sort, we believe that we can demonstrate how, in crisis planning and response, key voices not ordinarily considered can be heard, and why they need to be. If not, they might be heard at some other point; or they might be totally ignored to the detriment of developing a full and honest sense of the crisis into public scrutiny. These voices help frame the crisis, the quality of response to it, and the lessons learned that can mitigate future crises of similar kinds. If the voices are not heard during the crisis, they are likely to be stronger and more condemning after the fact. This realization can inform and enhance crisis communication research and best practices while also strengthening the quality of emergency response planning and response protocols.

Below, we turn to Senators Landrieu and Obama, who sagely displayed transcendence and featured "security" in such a manner that the term resonated with public sentiments about the government's responsibility to its citizens. More specifically, Senator Obama took advantage of the outpouring of public sympathy for those affected by Hurricane Katrina and the floods by stretching the favored term "security" to make these events a matter of national concern just like the Bush administration did for 9/11 (which could have remained regional, New York and Pentagon problems) and for the Iraq war (which could have been regarded as a regionalized, overseas skirmish). By using the rhetoric of security—just as had been done in the two previous instances before Katrina—Obama appropriated the technique of the Bush administration to transcend the discourse of Katrina from a regional, localized concern to a national concern.

According to Hearit (1997), to transcend means to "go beyond" or "cross over"; moreover, in the terms of external "organizational communication, transcendence is a form of symbolic action whereby a corporation [or other organization] redefines its acts so that they are viewed from a larger context, one that customarily features an ethical dimension" (pp. 219–220). Hearit's (1997) use of transcendence featured the organization's point of view rather than that of the victims; however, in the current case, transcendence was used by emergent agents on behalf of marginalized stakeholders. Senators Landrieu and Obama refused to allow for the events surrounding Katrina to stop at the level of race or class, which could be perceived as intolerable. Instead they found a way to remedy the problem by appealing to a broader, unifying concept of security. This strategy was a clever form of rhetorical invention, as few U.S. citizens would question the ethicality of ensuring the safety and security of all citizens. Moreover, since at least 9/11, and including the 2004 campaign that launched Obama into national prominence, the term "security" has been the hallmark of the Bush administration.

Stretching the Rhetoric of National Security

Senators Landrieu and Obama used the rhetorical invention of transcendence based on the term "security" to interpret and criticize the planning and preparation for and response of government agencies to the Hurricane Katrina crisis. Their rationale for choosing "security" might have been a result of its being a central term in our nation at the time and one to which spokespersons for the Bush administration referred frequently. Although we cannot fully account for what motivated the Senators to choose "security," it appears that they were nevertheless adept at determining effective ways of framing an issue.

Security, as a variation of safety, is one of the four molar constructs in issues management (Heath, 1997). Drawing from the work of Buchholz (1985), Heath (1997) identified security as one of four themes that recur as motivators for issues. The other themes are: environmental quality/responsibility, fairness, and equality. Thus, the Senators chose one of the themes most fundamental to all issues.

Although we cannot attribute motives with complete accuracy, by closely analyzing the rhetorical strategies the Senators employed, we can develop useful insights into the meaning of and possible motivation for their statements, as well as the meaning and motivations that these statements might have induced in others. Undeniably, Hurricane Katrina shed light on the important issues of race and class; however, the Senators responded to this national disaster through transcendence; in doing so, they cleverly appropriated the administration's favored term, "security," along the way. The Senators used the term in following ways: (1) security is national, not bi-partisan; (2) security must do more than plan for the "haves and cans"—it must also encompass planning for the "have nots," the "have nothings," and the "can'ts"; (3) security additionally must strike a strategic balance between, as opposed to a bifurcation of, free market solutions and government intervention as viable ways to address this crisis situation; (4) security further entails making such organizations as FEMA more reflective and responsible, as well as creating oversight and appointing a CFO to assure responsiveness to the issues and needs instead of profit maximization for those who might seek to profit unjustly from the crisis; and (5) finally, security involves being accountable to all citizens, especially those who are most vulnerable.

Throughout our analysis, we further develop these five notions and demonstrate how the Senators used them rhetorically to transcend the dividing lines of race and class. We have collapsed these five notions into three overarching themes. Thus, we have separated the Senators' remarks into three parts: (1) "We failed our citizens so badly"; (2) "Ineptitude is colorblind"; and (3) "We need to be pragmatic instead of ideological."

We Failed Our Citizens So Badly

Senator Landrieu's argument is clear; we failed, miserably, to attend to the needs of the Gulf Coast citizens who were in desperate need of help. On September 2, 2005 Landrieu stated:

> For the past week, the people of Southeast Louisiana and the Gulf Coast have suffered in a desperate and unprecedented way, waiting for the Administration to employ the full resources of the United States government—resources which, for whatever reason, have yet to arrive. Hopefully, after today's visit, President Bush understands the enormity of our situation here on the ground and will put the full weight of his office behind our recovery efforts. (Landrieu, 2005e, para. 1)

To her dismay, the help that the Senator was expecting was slow to arrive. Thus, the next day, Senators Landrieu and Reid sent a letter to the President asking him to take immediate action to support Katrina sufferers. The letter noted that, in addition to the devastation that the President witnessed earlier that week, countless citizens had "lost their homes and possessions, and now are suffering with nowhere to live, few, if any, resources, and nowhere to turn. These increasingly desperate people are struggling to find food and water and to ensure their survival" (Landrieu, 2005h, para. 2). To Landrieu, the inadequacy of the response was unacceptable: "Only the federal government can adequately address the basic needs of our fellow Americans suffering from this disaster and they deserve a better response from their government" (para. 4).

Senator Obama's argument is also clear; we failed as a nation (and are failing in other ways, such as energy policy) to make our nation—especially its most vulnerable citizens—secure. When emergency response and crisis prevention measures in times of natural disasters seem predicated on an "SUV" (sports utility vehicle) evacuation model instead of one that acknowledges a non-SUV population, a lack of national security is present.

Senator Obama (2005c) illustrated this point in stating:

> [W]hat must be said is that whoever was in charge of planning and preparing for the worst case scenario appeared to assume that every American has the capacity to load up their family in an SUV, fill it up with $100 worth of gasoline, stick some bottled water in the trunk, and use a credit card to check in to a hotel on safe ground. (para. 11)

This clearly was not the case in New Orleans, where the overwhelming majority of the citizens who were left behind did not have such means.

Senator Obama (2005c) went on to state, "I see no evidence of active malice, but I see a continuation of passive indifference on the part of our government" (para. 11). This indifference might have been due, in part, to the feeling that the SUV model of evacuation would work in several other hurricane-threatened areas. For example, Houston and surrounding areas, following in the wake of Katrina, were threatened by Hurricane Rita. This, however, was an SUV evacuation that might have worked too well. About 700,000 more people evacuated than should have because they could and they were motivated to do so by Katrina. Houston is quite different from the "fish bowl" New Orleans. It is not a fish bowl, and it has many evacuation routes, which was not the case in New Orleans.

Obama (2005c), in addition to asking, "How we could have failed our fellow citizens so badly?" evoked the memory of 9/11 to show the unity of the nation, as well

as to show the nation that by failing to plan adequately for and evacuate citizens of New Orleans the nation was vulnerable to both natural and terrorists attacks:

> One of the heartening things about this crisis has been the degree to which the outrage has come from across the political spectrum; across races; across income. The degree to which the American people sense that we can and must do better, and a recognition that if we cannot cope with a crisis that has been predicted for decades—a crisis in which we're given four or five days notice—how can we ever hope to respond to a serious terrorist attack in a major American city in which there is no notice, and in which the death toll and panic and disruptions may be far greater? (para. 9)

Obama sagely made the connection between preparing for a natural disaster and preparing for a terrorist attack by using a trifecta of invocations of "national security": (1) The Bush administration deemed 9/11 a matter of national security; (2) The Bush administration deemed the situation in Iraq a matter of national security; and (3) Senator Obama deemed Hurricane Katrina a matter of national security. Although Mayor Nagin made this point well in his public statements, this point did not seem to be widely accepted until Senator Obama connected the pieces of this trifecta and articulated them. Therefore, if preparation for a natural disaster is on a par with terrorism, then it is a matter of national security; failure to prepare adequately constitutes a national crisis. Thus Obama, by showing us the interconnectedness of the failings in the Katrina crisis and the failings of 9/11, as well as the threats associated with both, forces us to give serious thought to his question: "How we will prevent such a failure from ever occurring again?" (para. 8).

Ineptitude is Colorblind

Obama (2005c) noted:

> There's been much attention in the press about the fact that those who were left behind in New Orleans were disproportionately poor and African American. I've said publicly that I do not subscribe to the notion that the painfully slow response of FEMA and the Department of Homeland Security was racially-based. The ineptitude was colorblind. (para. 10)

The crisis situation that Katrina created was not an issue of race, but rather one of neglect and disparity in income and opportunities. The Senator further illustrated this point in stating:

> [It] is the deeper shame of this past week—that it has taken a crisis like this one to awaken us to the great divide that continues to fester in our midst. That's what all Americans are truly ashamed about, and the fact that we're ashamed about it is a good sign. (para. 13)

The Senator, in taking the position that the issue was not a racial issue and reassuring the audience that all Americans were ashamed by what they had witnessed, was able to transcend local white-versus-black conflicts and position the crisis as a national concern and, in doing so, brought the interconnectedness of society to the

fore. In this society, like all others, we need, rely on, and are dependent on one another for survival; however, the Senator reminds his audience that U.S. citizens have neglected this all-important precept:

> And so I hope that out of this crisis we all begin to reflect—Democrat and Republican—on not only our individual responsibilities to ourselves and our families, but to our mutual responsibilities to our fellow Americans. I hope we realize that the people of New Orleans weren't just abandoned during the Hurricane. They were abandoned long ago—to murder and mayhem in their streets; to substandard schools; to dilapidated housing; to inadequate health care; to a pervasive sense of hopelessness. (Obama, 2005c, para. 12)

By framing this issue as a threat to national security, the Senator was able to span partisan lines.

Usually, during the onset of wars and times of domestic discord, such as terrorist attacks, the nation is united. There is no time for bi-partisan politics. Only after a situation has lingered do bi-partisan politics begin to enter the discussion. In framing the Katrina crisis as a threat to national security, Obama likens it to other non-partisan concerns. In short, this crisis spans party lines and political orientation.

Senator Obama exhibited non-partisanship, both in terms of what he said in his public utterances and in his actions. He openly spoke about his association with Presidents Clinton and Bush, Sr., as well as joint sponsorship of federal legislation. He used these associations and the transcendent security frame to induce unity among U.S. citizens as it pertained to this national crisis. As the Senator stated, "Indeed, if there's any bright light that has come out of this disaster, it's the degree to which ordinary Americans have responded with speed and determination even as their government has responded with unconscionable ineptitude" (Obama, 2005c, para. 7).

Obama (2005c) acknowledged that ineptitude is colorblind, but he refused to dismiss it. In fact, he brings it to the fore in noting its unacceptability: "We're gonna have to do some hard thinking about how we could have failed our fellow citizens so badly, and how we will prevent such a failure from ever occurring again" (para. 8).

Senator Landrieu (2005a) also emphasized that ineptitude was unacceptable; while simultaneously refusing to dismiss it, she expressed her disappointment in the President's actions:

> But perhaps the greatest disappointment stands at the breached 17th Street levee. Touring this critical site yesterday with the President, I saw what I believed to be a real and significant effort to get a handle on a major cause of this catastrophe. Flying over this critical spot again this morning, less than 24 hours later, it became apparent that yesterday we witnessed a hastily prepared stage set for a Presidential photo opportunity; and the desperately needed resources we saw were this morning reduced to a single, lonely piece of equipment. The good and decent people of southeast Louisiana and the Gulf Coast—black and white, rich and poor, young and old—deserve far better from their national government. (para. 3)

Landrieu (2005a) also refused to excuse the ineptitude of FEMA:

> I understand that the U.S. Forest Service had water-tanker aircraft available to help douse the fires raging on our riverfront, but FEMA has yet to accept the aid. . . . Amtrak offered trains to evacuate significant numbers of victims. . . . FEMA again dragged its feet. (para. 2)

After these inadequate crisis responses (and several others that will go unmentioned), the then-head of FEMA Michael Brown resigned his position. In response to Brown's resignation, Landrieu (2005b) had this to say:

> Michael Brown's resignation is more than understandable following the events of the past two weeks. But his action today will not alone solve all the problems that plagued the federal government's response to Hurricane Katrina and the devastating floods that followed the levee breaches. The people of our nation, and in particular, the Gulf Coast, deserve and demand full accountability for this administration's missteps in protecting and helping Americans in need. Though the President has now addressed the leadership issues with FEMA, he must still address the resource and organizational issues which hindered our national response to this tragedy. (para. 1)

Taking all these events into account, we believe that the government's inadequate crisis response opened the door for Senator Landrieu to request additional financial resources. These requests can be viewed as attempts to attend to the needs of the people, but we also interpret them as a refusal to excuse the ineptitude. The refusal to accept ineptitude laid the foundation for her to seek financial retribution and support for Katrina sufferers. Landrieu (2005d), in response to the Senate passing the second emergency appropriations for hurricane relief, stated:

> We appreciate the release of an additional $50 billion to the people of Louisiana. The assistance is desperately required. However, I remain concerned that FEMA's efforts thus far have been unable to bring the needed immediate and direct assistance to the people of my state. More funding will clearly be needed to rebuild and revitalize the Gulf Coast region, and as the Administration considers the best avenue to provide this funding, I encourage them to provide direct financial support for our first responders that have shown much of the leadership FEMA has lacked. (para.1)

Additionally, in her letter to the President, Landrieu (2005h) reminded him, "[T]he Stafford Act gives you broad legal authority to address the needs of Katrina's victims. Under that law, for example, the Administration can provide cash benefits to individuals who have been stranded without financial resources" (para. 4). Landrieu (2005h) also reminded the President, "Current law also grants the President broad authority to provide transportation assistance in a disaster. . . . Providing such transportation assistance also should be a priority" (para. 6).

In addition, Landrieu (2005f) used her position to challenge those who questioned the amount of money requested for hurricane relief. She pointed out:

> A project that could have saved New Orleans from much of Hurricane Katrina's wrath languished in the courts. Countless requests for more flood and hurricane

protection went unheeded. And initiatives to restore the USA's wetlands were repeatedly and irrationally opposed. (para. 2)

She lamented:

> Tight-fisted ignorance and misstated statistics seem to push us down this tired road of broken promises again. Some suggest that $212 billion over five years is too much for rebuilding Louisiana's devastated infrastructure and diverse economy. They claim $40 billion of it is too high for protection projects already authorized by Congress and recommended by the Army Corps of Engineers. Comparing the costs with the Corps' annual budget, critics fail to note that these projects will span decades and protect parishes across Louisiana—not just New Orleans. (para. 3)

Simply put, these examples begin to suggest that Landrieu used discourse to argue for, and at times to procure, more funds for Katrina sufferers.

The Senators' arguments suggested that the Bush administration needed to be both reflective and responsible in order to prevent such events from recurring. According to the earlier posited crisis management theories, organizations are more likely to plan for and respond appropriately to crises if they are reflective. The Senators centered their observations on the premise that the federal response, in particular, was not sufficiently reflective. Those responsible failed to plan for and then to address the security of those most in need: "We had nothing before the Hurricane. Now we have even less" (Obama, 2005c, para. 14). Key questions are as follows: With decades of warning and time for adequate planning, was the response of the responsible agencies, especially FEMA, adequate? Was the response appropriately reflective? Clearly, if we "failed our fellow citizens so badly," then the answers are negative.

In addition, although President Bush openly acknowledged disparities related to race and poverty in the wake of Katrina, he and others in his administration had worked to dismantle programs that addressed those joined problems. He was not appropriately reflective even in his acknowledgement. The Senators, however, did not focus on this contradiction. Rather, in their public utterances, they appealed to the nation yet again in noting that its citizens were more adept than the current administration. As Senator Obama (2005c) stated:

> The fact that all of us—black, white, rich, poor, Republican, Democrat—don't like to see such a reflection of this country we love, tells me that the American people have better instincts and a broader heart than our current politics would indicate. (para.12)

He challenged everyone to do be reflective: "We had nothing before the Hurricane. Now we have even less—I hope that we all take the time to ponder the truth of that message" (paras. 14–15). And the truth of that message requires us to rethink several issues; one of which is security.

We Need to be Pragmatic Instead of Ideological

The Senators, through discourse, established the following: being ideological about Katrina largely contributed to this crisis situation. Senator Landrieu (2005c) further addressed this ideological position in her comments:

> I will not apologize for asking this on behalf of the 4.5 million people that live in my state, black and white, that have been devastated—Hispanic and Asian, that have been devastated by this storm—two million of them who have lost their home, their neighborhood and their place. Most of them have never asked the government for one thing—never been on one program—and they come here to ask for a little bit of help and they have to be told: "You need to be more self-reliant." How much more self-reliant can people be? Other than raise their children, send them to school, balance their budget, pay for their house and pay their bills on time. And serve in the military. How much more self-reliant can they be? They thought they lived in a nation that when something like this happened, that was really unexpected and not their fault, somebody would be there to help them. But all we have is photo ops and message boards and press releases. When it comes down to actually passing some legislation with some money attached to it that could actually help someone, we can't. (para. 6)

Now that we have discussed this particular aspect of being ideological in some detail, we turn to other examples the Senators use to stress the need for being pragmatic, as opposed to ideological.

Senator Obama (2005b) stated that, in recent times, the Democratic Party has often been considered one that looks "for government for the first answer to every problem," whereas the Republican Party has often been seen as preferring to rely on free market forces as solutions to crisis; he quickly tried to move away from the philosophical differences and became pragmatic: "I think that what we are going to have to figure out is how do we do both and as opposed to either/or" (para. 5). Senator Obama furthered his point through the following example:

> All of us recognize that jobs are the best anti-poverty program and . . . we should ask the market to create those jobs and create the framework in which entrepreneurship and business development can occur . . . [; however,] we also have to recognize that there are communities that may not have access to capital and they may need government to help initially seed their entrepreneurial efforts. (para. 5)

The Senator (2005a) concluded his comments by observing that ideally everyone would recognize that individuals "have to take responsibility and that the market solution, where possible, is potentially the more efficient and preferable one, but also recognizing government has a role. That's the kind of practical, common sense, pragmatic America that I think works best" (para. 5).

Part of ensuring security is to be sure that individuals and organizations do not misappropriate or mismanage funds that are intended to help those in need. The Senator recognized that there would be individuals and organizations attempting to profit from the crisis. In two of his presentations, he drew attention to "no-bid" and "cost-plus" contracts that the government used in Iraq (Obama, 2005a, 2005b). He did not want the funds allotted for the Katrina recovery efforts to be squandered. Thus, the Senator paired up with Republican Senator Tom Coburn to "create a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) to oversee all expenditures associated with the Hurricane Katrina relief and reconstruction effort" (Obama, 2005a, para. 4).

In this bill, the Senators specifically laid out the details concerning the duties of the CFO. The bill required the President to appoint this officer, this appointment had to be confirmed by the Senate, and this officer was to oversee and manage any agency using federal funds for the Hurricane Katrina relief effort. In addition, he or she was to oversee the dispersing of the funds to determine whether the people most in need were receiving the aid and to determine whether companies that hired local workers were receiving the funds. Ultimately, the Senator was prodding the federal government and federal agencies to be reflective, responsible, and above all accountable. This is evident in the following comment: "As we look towards the massive Gulf Coast rebuilding efforts ahead, we must demand accountability over how the billions of dollars we've given to FEMA are spent" (Obama, 2005a, para. 5). In his rhetoric, however, Senator Obama was holding the federal government and agencies accountable for a great deal more.

Conclusion

Hearit (1997) has suggested that successful use of a transcendent strategy requires two components: redefinition and an appeal to higher values. The Senators, by redefining what Mayor Ray Nagin, Kanye West, and others deemed issues of race and class and positioning the events surrounding Hurricane Katrina more broadly as relating to a national security promise that was going unfulfilled, were successful in garnering more support for their positions and Katrina sufferers. By stretching the rhetoric of security, the Senators were able to equate preparation for a national disaster with preparation for a terrorist attack. They also emphasized that both are matters of national security, and failure to prepare adequately for a natural disaster—just as failure to prepare for terrorist attacks—was grounds for a national crisis.

Even before Katrina made landfall, Senator Landrieu began constructing the national security frame. She wanted the nation to know that "the reverberations of this storm will be felt not only in Louisiana but across the nation" (Landrieu, 2005g, para. 2). Landrieu articulated the following important role that Louisiana plays in ensuring the nation's security; Louisiana's "unique wetlands" provide the state with a "buffer zone from natural disasters such as hurricanes. But our wetlands have been eroding. . . . [T]o protect America's energy supply and transportation needs, the federal government must join with the people of Louisiana to preserve [Louisiana's and] America's wetlands" (Landrieu, 2005g, para. 3).

Senators Landrieu and Obama's comments, as well as the positioning and the accuracy of their positions, helped give other alternative frames power that probably forced government agencies into positions they would have preferred to avoid. We believe, for instance, that the Senators' voices helped to secure more financial assistance for Katrina victims and restoration efforts from the Bush administration. Simply put, the Senators' discourse and actions help us to explain how during a crisis an alternative frame can emerge and acquire legitimacy when expressed in ways that give voice to a group that otherwise is likely to be marginalized by the crisis—and is silent because it is marginalized. In this case, transcending issues of race and class by

using the Bush administration's key term of "security" enabled the Senators to add strength and credibility to their positions, as well as empower other marginalized publics' frames.

When questioned about the racial aspect of the federal government's slow response to Katrina, Bush (2005b) stated that the storm did not discriminate and neither would the recovery and rescue efforts; however, it was not until after the statements by the Senators (as well as other government officials), letters to the President from Senator Landrieu, and constant pleas for help that the President began talking about Hurricane Katrina as a national security issue. In fact, his first mention of Katrina as such came on September 15. In his September 15 address to the nation, President Bush (2005a) announced that the federal government would learn from the lessons of Hurricane Katrina so that the nation could make necessary changes to be "better prepared for any challenge of nature, or act of evil men, that could threaten our people" (para. 31). Although we realize that causality cannot be established, in our analysis, we nevertheless feel that by consistently using the nation security frame, the Senators were able to influence the Bush administration's discourse and framing of this particular crisis (as an issue of national security), as well as to equate this crisis with terrorist threats to the nation in its severity.

Some might interpret the statements of U.S. Senators as representing the voice of the federal government. Upon closer analysis, however, we find that Senators Landrieu and Obama used their positions in the Senate as a platform to publicize their positions and the positions of Katrina sufferers.

Managerially biased analyses focusing on organizations like FEMA might shed some light on how they can restore their images, or highlight what types of crisis management strategy work best in particular situations. This essay, however, takes another approach. It helps to remedy the problem of managerial bias, and to overcome other distortions in the crisis communication literature, in demonstrating how rhetorical strategies, such as transcendence, may enable stakeholders affected by the crisis situation and their advocates to challenge the narrative of control, gain exposure for their positions, influence public opinion, and shape responses to a crisis. Simply put, more than just the responsible parties are involved in crisis events. Research and scholarly literature should better reflect this fact.

This essay demonstrates further that a failure to respond to a crisis situation— either by being silent or by communicating inadequately—can create a new organizational legitimacy crisis. In this case, the federal government continued to deal with the physical, psychological, and emotional damage that Katrina caused; however, it also had to attend to the threats to its legitimacy stemming from both its lack of preparedness and its failure to respond promptly.

Pragmatic Implications

This study is not void of limitations. The most obvious limitation is that we only drew on the discourses of two rhetors. We feel, however, that our analysis profited from our being able to go into greater depth by focusing on the rhetoric of two

Senators, as opposed to analyzing multiple rhetors and not giving thorough attention to their discourses. Another limitation of this study was that we examined only texts that originated within four months of the emergence of crisis. This is a period during which people are probably most adamant and willing to speak out. We realize that at some point, the voices that cried out vehemently during the aftermath of Katrina may have faded into silence. If we were able to allow for a year, or several years, to pass, perhaps the voices that challenged would not be so scathing or possibly even present. This might have left the responsible organizations facing crisis scrutiny with additional communicative options to ignore various publics' previously voiced perspectives. We do not deny this as a potentially serious limitation; however, we are convinced that our analysis shows that key voices, especially those voices speaking on behalf of traditionally marginalized and eventually forgotten voices, should be heard during times of crisis.

In the case of Katrina, crisis management has only just begun for various federal agents and agencies. This analysis reveals that publics other than the major organizations and players involved in a crisis can and should be prepared to seize the opportunity to make their positions public and to elicit support. According to Heath (1997), crises are interruptions in the dominant narrative of control; this presents a prime opportunity for publics whose constituents want to challenge the dominant organizational narrative to enact their own versions. Unless they act promptly, these other voices and emergent agents might only have a few other opportunities, if any, to enter their frame into the public dialogue (Ryan, Carragee, & Meinhofer, 2001). Being prepared and seizing an opportunity can give these publics a more powerful voice when it is apt to do the most good. This is a strong lesson for students of applied communication.

With regard to crisis managers who are responsible for responding on behalf of organizations found to be at fault for poor management in a crisis situation, crisis communication research and development of best practices should be cognizant of the voices of marginalized agents and their advocates. In a time of crisis, these voices are quite likely to surface, albeit easy to overlook. By being attuned to such voices, crisis managers can strengthen the quality of emergency response planning and response protocols.

We drew on crisis hypotheses for our rationale. One of the key aspects of our analysis has been the importance of the spotlighted organization being reflective before and during the crisis. As Van Ruler and Vercic (2005) have recently observed, public relations can help organizations to be reflective, which, in turn, enhances their managerial abilities and perspectives. It enriches their planning and strategic options. That logic is supported by this analysis. Management is more reflective when it considers in planning and operations the voices of those who might be forgotten but whose interests are affected by the organization. Being reflective, inclusive, and proactive can enhance their crisis response and reduce indifference to either the marginalized publics or their suffering; engaging in reflection, inclusion, and being proactive also might spare the responsible organization from moments of embarrassment should these voices come to emerge with a vengeance.

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