

## **Communicating and managing crisis in the world of politics**

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### **Introduction: Welcome to the world of politics in times of crisis**

‘I say to all Spaniards that we must not aspire to anything except the complete defeat of terrorism. Complete and total defeat. Their surrender without conditions of any kind. No negotiation is possible or desirable with these murderers who have so often sown death throughout the geography of Spain... We shall never allow a minority of fanatics to force decisions about our national future on us.’ (Spanish prime minister Pedro Aznar speaking in the wake of the March 2004 Madrid train bombings)

‘Amidst all this tragedy, I am proud to live in a country that has managed to hold its head up high at a critical time. I have been impressed by the dignity, compassion and resolve I have met. We are a small country, but a proud people. We are still shocked by what has happened, but we will never give up our values. Our response is more democracy, more openness, and more humanity. But never naivety.’ (Norwegian prime minister Jens Stoltenberg’s national memorial address for the bombing victims of Norway, 24 July 2011)

A comparative analysis of how these two European prime ministers communicated the violent incident that had befallen their countries shows their markedly different styles (Sinkkonen, 2016). Both leaders used national symbolism and values in explaining the relevance of the attacks from the point of view of large group identities. However, Aznar’s partisan interpretation of the attack (which he wrongfully blamed on Basque separatist group ETA) and his subsequent rigidity in defending that frame in the face of rapidly mounting evidence to the contrary may well have cost his party the national election that took place just days after the attack (Olmeda, 2008). Stoltenberg, on the other hand, effectively de-politicized the crisis, and his party enjoyed the rally-around-the-flag-effect in the municipal elections that followed the attack.

Examples of politically consequential crisis communication – both verbal and non-verbal - by ministers and heads of government abound. Think Angela Merkel’s ‘Wir schaffen das’ statement at the peak of the Syrian refugee crisis in the late Summer of 2015 - a fateful and game-changing moral and political commitment to receive the highest inflow of refugees in Europe since World War II. Think Theresa May’s wooden and perfunctory performance at the scene of the Grenfell

fire tragedy, where she first conspicuously eschewed talking to survivors, and was heckled when, under pressure of public disapproval, felt forced to return and make up, ending up having to make politically embarrassing apology for the inadequacy of her own and the government's crisis response. In contrast, think of veiled New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern hugging and speaking at length to and about the people in the countries Muslim community who had been targeted in the deadly 2019 lone-wolf mosque attack, whilst at the same time getting firm gun control legislation passed and gaining a global profile as a leader combining humanity, strength and courage in the process.

With this chapter we would like to invite the reader interested in crisis communication into the world of politics, and in particular into the world of political and administrative executives at the apex of central government organizations. Although the role of political leaders and the performance of political leadership during crises is still a somewhat underdeveloped research area within the broader crisis and disaster studies field (Kuipers and Welsh 2017), there are good reasons to pay sustained attention to it (De Clercy and Ferguson, 2016). From an academic perspective, as already indicated in chapter XX, there has been substantial theory development and ample empirical research on the broader 'politics of crisis management', including on the role of communication processes within it (Boin et al, 2017).

Thus far the 'generic', mostly corporations-oriented field of crisis communication and crisis management and the study of those same processes within governments and public sector organizations have been separate strands that as yet await productive cross-fertilization (Bozeman, 2013). From a practical perspective, the capacity to navigate crises has become a make or break performance test for business and political leaders alike, and purposeful communication is a key aspect of that navigation (Stern, 2009). From a societal perspective research into the politics of managing and communicating during crisis generates vital knowledge about the functioning of social and political institutions. In democratic political systems in particular, crises test the robustness of their institutional fabric and the vitality of their accountability regimes (Brändström, 2015; De Ruijter, 2019).

The perspectives on crisis communication presented in this chapter depart from the assumption that crisis communication as performed by governments and public sector organizations is essentially a political activity. They view crisis communication as an exercise in public meaning making under pressure: providing emotionally aroused publics with authoritative accounts of what is going on, why it occurs, what its implications are, and how as individuals and members of the community they should think about and act in relation to the crisis at hand. This may seem relatively straightforward, but in today's world of internet-driven real-time politics, this meaning-making commences as events are unfolding and considerable uncertainty, confusion and volatility exist. Moreover, political leaders' voices are not the only ones that are being aired and listened to. Their narratives are likely to be challenged by slightly or radically different interpretations offered by their political opponents as well as potentially by other political stakeholders, victims, journalists, commentators, lawyers and sectional interests.

In other words, when communicating crises, political leaders and government officials effectively compete in politically consequential 'framing contests' (Boin et al, 2009). The course and outcomes of these contests cannot be understood by only considering only the particulars of the 'event context' (what is happening on the ground). Equally if not more important are the 'political context' - what else is happening, has happened or is about to happen in the political

process and on the political arena – and the intent and skill with which different actors read these contexts and gear their communicative performances accordingly.

In addition, we surmise that political crisis communication has predominantly been studied through the lenses of executive *politicians* whilst largely ignoring the dynamics of ‘bureaucratic’ crisis communication and management as performed by agency heads and other leading public servants within the executive branch (but see Stark 2011; 2014). They and their organizations have their own organization’s and/or professions’ reputations to consider and guard (Carpenter and Krause 2012; Carpenter and Krause 2015), and can easily get caught up in politicised post-crisis accountability processes (often referred to as ‘blame games’, e.g. Brändström and Kuipers, 2003; Hood 2011; De Ruiter, 2019 Resodihardjo, 2020). This we argue, merits particular interest in bureaucratic actors holding the potential to develop our theorizing on the politics of crisis management and communication even further when performed in the context of central governments.

In the remainder of the chapter, we first introduce key understandings of crises offered within the political crisis communication literature. We then situate crisis communication within a broader framework of crisis politic and the role of leadership therein (Boin et al, 2017), focusing in particular on the theory of crisis exploitation (Boin et al 2009). The final part of the chapter then turns towards the roles of the bureaucracy vis-à-vis their political principal(s) in managing and communicating crises in political contexts.

### **Defining crisis and crisis communication in a political context**

How do students of crisis management in political and governmental settings define their key object of study, crisis? Although the particulars differ slightly across authors, there is widespread consensus in this literature that crises are not defined in terms of ‘events’ (e.g. a natural disaster, a train collision, a terror attack, a bridge collapse, a sex scandal, an urban riot) but – in keeping with the Thomas theorem – in terms of politically significant actors’ *perceptions* of events. In that, they fit entirely with the mainstream of generic crisis communication research (Coombs, 2015: 3). From an elite-focused and managerial point of view, building upon work in studies of interstate conflicts on the one hand (Holsti, 1972; Brecher, 1980), and studies of organizations in crises on the other (Hermann, 1963), Rosenthal et al’s (1989: 10) oft-used definition suggests that a state of crisis can be said to exist to the extent that “...policy makers experience a serious threat to the basic structures or the fundamental values and norms of a system, which under time pressure and highly uncertain circumstances necessitates making vital decisions.’ In other words: crises are socially constructed and thus relative phenomena. Events that in operational terms may be relatively small – such as the murder of a young woman – can nevertheless be perceived politically and institutionally to be highly pivotal – for example when it becomes known that the perpetrator of the murder was a convicted sexual offender out on leave from the psychiatric institution to which he was committed, and that this type of scenario has occurred several times before in the decade up to the murder. Conversely deadly acts of political violence that would cause a major stir in Iceland or Switzerland have long been ‘routine’ in Northern Irish and Spanish politics, for example, and only acts of exceptional scale or with powerful symbolic ramifications might be considered ‘critical’ by seasoned, battle-hardened policy makers. In other words, since it is the subjective perceptions of threat, urgency and uncertainty that count, it becomes vitally important to take into account the temporal, cultural and political context in

which certain dramatic incidents occur to understand why only some incidents, accidents and adverse events become perceived and thus responded to as crises.

While the definition offered by Rosenthal et al. emphasizes ‘policymakers’, subsequent work in this tradition acknowledges that the perceptions and actions of other actors in the political system are relevant too, since crisis events, narratives and imagery can be experienced and evoked not just by elected politicians but by the public service, the media, political parties, interest groups and indeed anyone with a mobile device who happens to be in a particular place at a particular time or emits words about events that reverberate on the Internet. Based upon that acknowledgement ‘t Hart (1993) has gone a step further and offers a more explicitly political – rather than a elite-focused managerial – crisis definition. Heavily influenced by early work of Coombs (1980) and of pioneering student of symbolism, language and rituals in politics Murray Edelman (1964, 1977), he argued that: crises are not only perceptual but affective categories; that they involve multiple levels of conflict; that they disrupt our images and assessment of ‘the way things get done around here’; and that consequently they provide not just threats to but also opportunities for mass mobilization and (self-)dramatization by political actors. ‘t Hart’s (1993: 39) alternative crisis definition suggests that non-routine events only become crises to the extent that in the process of meaning-making that they trigger ‘a breakdown of familiar symbolic frameworks legitimitating the pre-existing socio-political order’ occurs. In other words, the currency of crises in political terms is the erosion of trust and legitimacy in the institutions and elites that govern us.

While it has long been recognized that crises can take many forms and in the political crisis management literature crisis typologies abound as they do in the generic crisis communication literature (Frandsen and Johansen 2017), from a political crisis communication perspective, the distinction between situational and institutional types of crises is particularly salient. Situational crises are those in which the source of the perceived threat outside the system that bears the brunt of it . It is exogenous actors and factors (nature, foreign powers, higher levels of government, international markets, multinational corporations, technological dependencies) that create an unfortunate situation for ‘us’. Crises become institutional when the dominant understanding of their origins and escalation is one that emphasizes endogenous factors: it is ‘we’ who have created or exacerbated our own risks, conflicts, breakdowns and tragedies (‘t Hart 2014:129). Institutional crises are more palpably and inherently political, because they then activate a politics of investigation, accountability and blame – the political equivalent to rituals of mourning, solidarity and commemoration that communities facing purely situational crises (‘Acts of God’) go through. They are both forms of collective coping. But whereas in the situational crisis scenario incumbent political and bureaucratic elites are looked to for leading the community through dark days and assisting it in its hour of need, in the institutional crisis scenario those elites themselves can well become the target of public scrutiny, indignation and repudiation.

Table 1 provides some examples of situational and institutional crises, which makes a further distinction based on the speed with which they manifest themselves. Urgent crises are the classical ‘big-bang’, sudden, swift, shocking major disruptions. Creeping crises involve ‘slow-burning’, much more gradually unfolding cumulation of threat, decay, tension and disequilibrium, the acknowledgement of whose very occurrence is likely to be much more subject to contestation.

Table 1 A typology of crises

<i>Crisis type</i> <i>Manifestation</i>	<i>Situational</i>	<i>Institutional</i>
<i>Acute</i>	Natural disasters Pandemics Regime collapse in major global or regional powers Peak episodes in complex emergencies	Ineffective emergency responses Emergency-exposed institutional failures (e.g. bank frauds or collapses) Public revelations of institutional fraud, waste and abuse
<i>Creeping</i>	Geopolitical shifts Ecosystem transformations Demographic imbalances	Chronic policy failures Erosion of citizen trust in public institutions and office-holders Incremental degradation of public assets and infrastructure Policy or organizational paralysis by stalemates

The situational-institutional differentiation resonates with Coombs' notion of crises belonging to different clusters: the victim cluster where there is very little attribution of crisis responsibility as they are caused by natural disasters. And the accidental versus preventable cluster, where there is low or strong attributions of crisis responsibility due to them being caused by for the former e.g. technical errors and for the latter e.g. humans errors, organizational misdeeds (Coombs 2015:150) (institutional crisis). Such a differentiated understanding of crises has important implications for crisis communication both inside and outside the political sphere. While crisis are almost by definition unpredictable, many however do not arrive unexpectedly (Coombs 2015:3). As Boin et al (2008: 4) observe: "When the crisis in question is widely held to have been unforeseeable and uncontrollable, the amount of explanation and excusing they [public office-holders] have to do is relative limited. But when there is a widespread perception that the threat could have been foreseen and possibly avoided all together, or that the official response after its occurrence was substandard, political leaders and officials may end up in troubled waters." Hence, the latter provides for a much more challenging communication task due to the high level of politicking involved from political opposition parties etc. holding an interest in isolating the blame for the crisis on the part of the government.

Communication scholars are highly familiar with this reality. Their version of 'institutional crisis' is '...a crisis where a communication crisis overlaps the original crisis in so far as the organization in crisis is not able to manage the communication processes that should contribute

to the handling of the original crisis.” (Johansen and Frandsen 2017:79, see also Grebe 2013). It is when a situational crisis morphs into an institutional one that crisis communication becomes not just a matter of tactical-level ‘event response’ but of strategic-level leadership of the political forces that are unleashed by the framing of the events as being a product of the system rather than befalling it. This morphing process can occur in several ways:

- A. As news media are more interested in covering the handling of crises including the communication in relation to the crisis, than focusing on ‘what happened in the first place’ (Frandsen and Johansen, 2017:48), they may well detect deficiencies of preparedness, training and resourcing, poor information-sharing and miscommunication between agencies, and failures of coordination due to political friction between different policymakers, bureaus and levels of government. Each of these could be leveraged to alter the public’s view of the crisis.
- B. Inquiries that occur in the wake of events that were first experienced as purely situational ‘national tragedies’ such as the 9/11 and the Breivik attacks can lay bare the fact that to some significant extent these attacks could only have occurred at the scale they did because there were major errors of risk perception, intelligence-sharing and incident response in the long lead-up to and/or during the operational response phase.
- C. A narrative takes hold that the vulnerabilities and failures exposed by the crisis were in fact an unintended but nevertheless manifest consequence of strategic policy decisions of current or previous government elites. Think of the role of post-GFC austerity measures of the British government being singled out as a pivotal contributing factor for the local council’s regulatory failures that exacerbated the rapid spread and deadly impact of the Grenfell Towers fire.

None of these escalation pathways is a matter of ‘events occurring’; they are the product of retrospective meaning-making around the question ‘how did this happen and what caused it to happen’. The extent to which this meaning-making leads to escalation of the political stakes of the crisis depends on many factors (Boin and ‘t Hart, 2000). One is timing: escalation from situational to political crisis is more likely when an incident occurs relatively close to an election period, or when it follows on the back of an earlier, morphologically similar incident. Another is media attention: where the media are already pre-occupied with critical perspectives on persons, policies and scandals of a government, the incident at hand is more likely to become ‘endogenised’ into an institutional crisis narrative than if its reporting slant vis a vis the government has been relatively benign. A third is political framing and coalition-building skills: whether crises are ‘contained’ at the level of situational crises or escalate to become high-politics institutional crises is also contingent upon how political and administrative executives define, narrate, frame and account for a crisis and its consequences. It is this third strand of crisis-shaping dynamics that much of the political crisis management literature focuses upon, and it is there that we now turn to.

### **Political management of crises: public leadership, framing contests and crisis exploitation**

Building upon the crisis literature yet also upon classical works on organization and management by Barnard (1938) and Selznick (1957), Boin et al (2005; 2017) developed a crisis leadership framework for political and public sector settings that has gained wide recognition in the literature and has been used in crisis management training programs around the world. In

their view public sector crisis management is effective when a combination of tasks is accomplished: an emerging crisis is swiftly detected and responders understand what is happening (sense-making), critical decisions are made by the right people and the efforts of responders are orchestrated, (decision-making and coordination), the government, office-holders and agencies are able to shape the public's perception and appreciation of what is going on, what is being done to deal with it and what its implications for them might be (meaning-making), responsibility is properly enacted through accountability procedures (accounting), and the crisis is used as a data point and trigger for collective self-examination and improvement (learning).

These five tasks bear significant correspondence to the leadership challenges identified in generic crisis management textbooks (e.g. Coombs 2015), but are to be performed in the institutional and cultural context of the public sector, which is marked by the electoral cycle, high levels of transparency, intensive media scrutiny, in-built political conflict, and multi-layered accountability regimes (cf Rainey 2014). Although the formulation of the tasks suggests crisis leadership involves a linear process moving linearly from an early onset to a post crisis phase, Boin et al. (2017) explicitly point to the constructed and dynamic nature of crises. This means that crises may evolve and – as we have seen, morph – in various ways and directions over time, necessitating repeated and iterative leadership task performance. Moreover, the nature of the leadership challenges involved changes as new events, facts, angles, and storylines emerge, and processes of (de)escalation between situational and institutional crisis types occur.

### *Meaning-making: navigating framing contests*

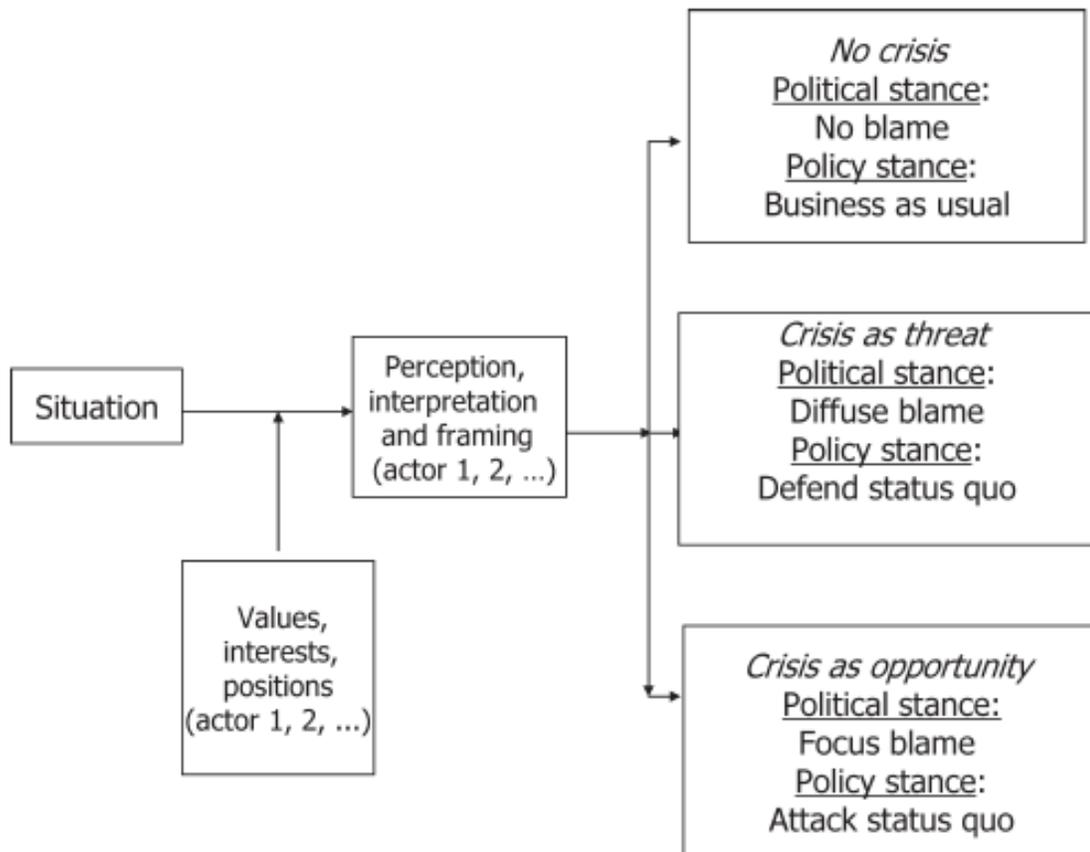
While any of the five crisis leadership tasks has some communication dimension to it, this is most pivotally the case for meaning making and the accounting. It is while performing the tasks that leaders can affect three strategically significant layers of perception and argumentation in the interpretation of a crisis: constructing significance (how bad are the damage done and the scope of further threat?); constructing causality (who or what are the driving forces behind the course of events?); and constructing responsibility (who had the duty and means to prevent bad things from happening and to mitigate their impact?).

Let us first focus on meaning making, which Boin et al (2017: 79) define as “...the attempt to reduce public and political uncertainty and inspire confidence in crisis leaders by formulating and imposing a convincing narrative.” (Boin et al 2017:79). As noted by Ansell et al (2014: 426), in the context of crisis ‘...people expect their leaders to reduce uncertainty and provide an authoritative account of what is going on, why it is happening and what needs to be done.’ Meaning-making in crises is performed in what Boin et al (2017: 81) describe as a triangular relationship between political actors (governmental and nongovernmental), the mass media (news producers: journalist and news organizations), and the citizenry (a pluralistic aggregate of all kinds of individuals, groups, and subcultures).

It is within this triangle that framing contests unfold. Government elites may enjoy some a priori advantages in these contests in terms of their access to vital information, to highly used and trusted communication channels, and to the support of specialized advisers. At the same time, it may well be the case that their personal or institutional credibility among (parts of) the public is low and further attenuated by the occurrence of crisis. The public, or segments within it, may instead be quite receptive to the ‘counterframes’ about the crisis that are offered by their political

competitors or emergent informal crisis leaders. Figure 1 provides a conceptual map of crisis-induced framing contests (see further also sections 3.2 and 3.3).

Figure 1 Anatomy of crisis-induced framing contests



Source: Boin et al. (2009), p. 84

As the figure shows, crisis-triggered meaning-making processes take place in a political context which makes questions about severity, causation, responsibility and accountability politically charged. Merely offering a story about the ongoing crisis – by holding a press conference, issuing a media release, sending a tweet - is not enough, it is getting others to accept it that often poses the biggest challenge (Ansell et al 2014:426), as Spanish prime minister Aznar and his colleagues learned at their cost during the Madrid bombings crisis. They could and should have done better, Boin et al (2017: 93-97) suggest, and identify seven planning,

preparedness and performative factors that are important for the effectiveness of crisis communication in political contexts.

- 1) Ensuring a clear division between politicians and their advisers providing the framing of the communication, while leaving the running of the communication to communication experts.
- 2) Being prepared for the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century crisis communication. Lack of such preparedness translates into a loss of speed and coherence in the critical stages of an acute crisis: authorities will be seen to be trailing the crisis story instead of shaping it.
- 3) Ensure that subject matter experts provide prompt, accurate and relevant information whilst not second guessing the work of framing and performing the resultant crisis communication, which should be the province of the responsible policymakers and their communications advisers in charge of the framing
- 4) Coordinate all outgoing communication with the aiming of speaking in one voice as much as possible even though messaging occurs through different messengers and channels
- 5) Formulate a media strategy that encompasses both traditional and social media platforms
- 6) Consider carefully what should be communicated when, but don't underestimate the public's desire for maximum transparency about anything that relates to the crisis of the moment
- 7) Don't just talk and talk. Make meaning and manage emotions by staging and performing supportive rituals and engaging in other forms of symbolic crisis behaviour ('t Hart, 1993) – a dimension of crisis communication at which New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern excelled in the wake of the Christchurch attack.

Winning the meaning making contest is by no means a trivial endeavor. It requires careful alignment between the content (accuracy, plausibility, practicality), transmitters (authority, style, credibility) and the performance (staging, scripting, timing, sequencing) of the crisis communication effort. This idea resonates with Coombs' (2004: 271) concept of the performance history of a crisis actor (see also Salomonsen et al, 2018). The performance history comprises of the degree of past crisis an actor or an organization has been involved in (the crisis history), as well as their record of behaviour vis a vis their key stakeholders (the relationship history). Past behavior provides for a 'causal antecedent' (Coombs 2004:271) that stakeholders apply when they make sense of crises, including attributions about their causes (Coombs 2004:267).

### *Accounting: navigating blame games*

Politically, a key question to emerge sooner or later in the course of any crisis is that of where responsibility lies and what if any consequences should ensue for those who are held to be responsible. Within any democratic polity the ability to hold office holders to account is vital for the legitimacy of and the trust granted to political and administrative actors and institutions. The term accountability refers both to a virtue to be pursued (actively taking responsibility) as well to the mechanisms and institutional arrangements that provide actors with incentives to pursue this virtue (Bovens et al 2014). At its heart lies communication. Mark Bovens (2007) has authoritatively defined accountability as "...a communicative interaction between an actor

(person or organization) and an accountability forum, in which the former's behavior (in the broadest sense of the word) is evaluated.”

The very occurrence of (situational) crises dramatizes the vulnerability of key tenets of the existing socio-political order. Institutional crises furthermore punctuate the belief in the power and capability of the state to protect citizens from collective harm or in the fundamental integrity of public office-holders and institutions that are supposed to epitomize and defend this order. Societies need a purification ritual to “bounce back” and “move on” from crises. Without an authoritative public reckoning and impactful lesson-drawing exercise it is very difficult for communities to achieve closure.

Notwithstanding this legitimate desire for public scrutiny and societal re-equilibration, post-crisis accountability processes are also always intensely political. From a normative, rational perspective, truth-finding dialogues, justifications and learning efforts would be expected. By contrast, during and after crisis situations a much more political high-stakes game tends to ensue among office-holders, agencies and other interested parties involved. Incumbent officials and agencies explain their actions prior to, during and after the occurrence of a major societal disturbance, whilst their opponents seek to expose their alleged failures. Through accountability, crises can make, break, or transform political and public service careers, agency mandates and reputations, and policy paradigms.

While formal accountability forums such as parliaments, inquiry committees and courts are of vital importance, so are (news and social) media (Kuipers and 't Hart 2014:591). They present crisis actors with informal theatres of public accountability that hold the ability to inflict reputational losses on executive actors in relation to a crisis. In addition, they have an ability to trigger and reinforce formal accountability fora to step up their oversight of those executives (Jacobs and Schillemans 2015). While the media may portray any crisis according to simple frame of villains and heroes (Boin et al 2017:115), formal accountability forums may hold the formal authority, resources, knowledge, as well as the incentives and obligations to ‘dig deeper’ and provide a more nuanced account of the crisis and the responsibility of the actors involved.

The bulk of the literature on accountability for crises focuses on the behaviour of elite actors who anticipate or respond to questions raised by different types of accountability forums about their responsibility in the lead-up and response to the crisis. In effect: how they actually play the ‘blame game’ (Hood, 2011; De Ruiter, 2019; Resodihardjo, 2020). Within generic crisis communication theory the question of who is held accountable and to whom responsibility is attributed is to a large extent suggested to come down to a question of whether the organization or the actor facing the crisis has as positive or negative relational history with its stakeholders. Similar lines of reasoning are pursued in political crisis communication research. It is argued, for example, that leaders who hold a good stock of pre-crisis political capital with key media actors have a better chance at remaining depicted as trustworthy and credible when a crisis emerges than leaders who enter the crisis off a much lower base (De Ruiter, 2019).

Kuipers and 't Hart (2014) identify two main strategies used: avoiding blame or demonstrating empathy and responsiveness. Avoiding blame proceeds by pursuing defensive storylines such as accusing the accusers, disqualifying critics, blaming the messenger, extenuating their own behavior, shifting the burden of proof onto critics, or blaming others (Bovens et al. 1999). In order to avoid blame, actors start with crisis or problem denial, then adopt other responses such

as admitting the crisis but blaming others; admitting partial responsibility but denying substantial involvement, until their strategy becomes untenable and actors are forced to admit both problem and culpability (Hood et al., 2009). Likewise, Brändström and Kuipers (2003) distinguish two dimensions along which government elites seek to reframe crisis narratives to escape blame: depicting the failures committed as technical-operational matters for which not they but lower-level officials should be held responsible, and by depicting any failures of policy whose occurrence they cannot feasibly deny as one-off incidental mishaps rather than as symptomatic of structural flaws. Also, designated or self-appointed scapegoats can deliberately take the fall for their superiors or patrons. Ellis's (1994) study of US presidential 'lightning rods' offers many examples, and the Trump administration has augmented the case catalogue further. \_

Another strand of research shows us the other side of the coin: immediate and public displays of empathy and humility which -intentionally or not - serve to pre-empt or attenuate crisis-induced blame games. Upsetting as they are, crises offer opportunities for the public display of compassion. Visits to the site of a tragedy, protest marches, the hailing of front-line heroes, earnest engagements with victims, public critical self-reflection, the appointment of fiercely independent and robust investigators – the repertoire is large ('t Hart, 1993). The evident failure to grasp the importance of empathy and perform symbolic crisis management is what made the May government's response to the Grenfell Towers fire so jarring, and Tony Blair's account-giving for the Iraq imbroglio so destructive of his historical reputation.

A number of communication tactics are available for the executive leaders faced with crisis-induced accountability pressures, and investigating which works when is a major thrust of contemporary research on the topic Table 1 provides a map. Note the strong family resemblance between these political tactics of blame management and those identified by researchers working in the 'image repair' and 'impression management' traditions of corporate communications research (Benoit, 2015)

*Table 2 Communicative tactics in crisis-induced accountability episodes*

<i>Accountability dimension</i>	<i>Strategy</i>	<i>Tactic</i>	<i>Argument</i>
Severity	Avoiding blame	Denial	Nothing bad happened
		Mitigation	Harm was negligible Harm was compensated You can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs
		Positive spin	It was a success
Causality		Combating causation	It was not my doing I was only a small contributor Uncontrollable forces reigned
		Combating capacity	I was not informed Others made vital decisions

			I was under orders
		Blaming the messenger	Publicity caused the harm
		Disqualifying investigators	Investigation was unfair Investigators are incompetent Report is unprofessional
Responsibility		Justification	I choose the lesser evil I prevented worse by others
		Preventing labeling	This was a typical behavior
		Scapegoating	I have punished the culprit(s)
	Demonstrating empathy and responsiveness	Repentance	I apologize, please forgive me I have learned by lesson
		Policy & organizational reform	I have changed policies

Adapted from Boin et al. (2017), p.119

*Exploitation: Crises as political opportunity structures*

Let us briefly return to Figure 1’s bottom-right part: the type-3 scenario of crises being experienced by at least some of the pivotal actors involved not as a threat but as an opportunity. Incumbent authorities, for example, may find themselves with strong societal demand for their leadership and a big public stage on which to dramatize it. They detect they have a license to act as caring, committed, courageous leader: demonstrating calmness, providing comfort and not least reducing the uncertainty related to any given crisis. Yet at the same time, it is the nature of crises as framing contests that somewhere, sometime, to some degree they may also provide other actors with possibilities for criticizing and challenging the executives’ framing of the crisis, attacking their credibility, diminishing their political capital, and pushing the case for alternative leaders and policies.

Boin et al. (2009) have captured this opportunistic dimension of crisis behaviour in their theory of crisis exploitation. They define crisis exploitation as the purposeful utilization of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for public office-holders and public policies. The theory seeks to open the ‘black box’ of post-crisis politicking in an effort to account for both the political impact and the policy impacts of crises, particularly institutional crises. The theory’s dependent variables are therefore twofold: the nature and depth of changes in political support for key public office-holders and/or agencies; and the nature and degree of policy change in the wake of the crisis. And again, communication becomes the crucial coin of crisis exploitation efforts: words as weapons, storylines as stratagems, drama as persuasion

The political ‘game’ of crisis exploitation centers around the clash between office-holders and their critics. Figure 2 depicts this as a simple game matrix, juxtaposing the strategic choices that office-holders and their critics will encounter in the politics of the post-crisis phase. It predicts the outcomes of the debate about accountability and blame that follows from particular configurations of political strategies. The calculus for office-holders involves a similar political trade-off: fighting to come away unscathed (box 3), or proactively, piously taking responsibility and thus forging a relatively benign political catharsis (box 1). At the same time, political oppositions and critics will be aiming to push the accountability processes towards a box-2 outcome, ideally manifesting itself in the form of forced resignations and government instability.

Figure 2. Crisis exploitation: The political game

	Critics	Absolve blame	Focus blame
Incumbents			
Accept responsibility		<i>I. Blame minimization:</i> Elite escape likely	<i>II. Blame acceptance:</i> Elite damage likely
Deny responsibility		<i>III. Blame avoidance:</i> Elite escape likely	<i>IV. Blame showdown:</i> Elite damage, escape, rejuvenation all possible

Likewise, the policy ‘game’ of crisis exploitation involves the clash between proponents of the institutional status quo and advocates for policy and organizational change. The latter consider whether the crisis can be leveraged to create momentum for wholesale policy termination and radical reform of the sector in which the crisis has occurred, or whether there is only potential to achieve more incremental changes. Status-quo players gauge the degree of destabilization of existing policies that the crisis narratives may inflict and assess whether they have the clout to resist any change of policy advocated by inquiries or change advocates, or whether some form of accommodating gesture (‘learning the lessons’) is necessary. Depending on these two sets of actors’ calculations and the power balance that emerges between them in the course of the crisis episode, four types of outcome may result, as depicted in Table 3. Since its launch over a decade ago, this framework has begun to be used to explain crisis-activated policy struggles and policy-change dynamics in a range of issue areas and political systems (Galaz et al, 2011; Opperman and Spencer, 2016; Liu, 2019).

Table 3. Crisis exploitation: the policy game

<b>Change advocates</b>	Press for policy paradigm shift	Press for incremental reform
<b>Status-quo players</b>		
Resist policy change	I: policy stalemate <i>or</i> politically imposed paradigm shift	II: policy stalemate <i>or</i> politically imposed incremental adjustment
Contain policy Change	III: major and swift rhetorical/symbolic change; more incremental substantive change	IV: negotiated incremental adjustment

Source: Boin et al (2009), p. 90.

### **Civil servants and bureaucratic politics in crisis management communication**

How do civil servants and their agencies fit into this picture? We know from public administration research that ‘bureaucrats’ conduct a balancing act between behaving as agents of their political principals (‘serving the ministers’) as well as agents in their own right (e.g. advancing their profession, stewardship of public values, defending organizational ‘turf’, see ‘t Hart and Wille, 2012). Some crisis management researchers suggest that interagency ‘bureaucratic politics’ can play an important role in shaping both first-line incident responses as strategic coordination and communication processes (Rosenthal, ‘t Hart and Kouzmin 1991; Boin and ‘t Hart 2012; Boin and Bynander, 2015). Others focus on the tensions that crises may forge or exacerbate in the relations between civil servants and their political principals, particularly around ‘speaking truth to power’ when political leaders are stressed or seek affirmation of their instincts or quick-fix solutions to complex challenges rather than independent and critical thinking (Preston and ‘t Hart, 1999), and the need for ‘multiple advocacy’ so as to give political leaders a broad range of considerations rather than groupthink-like contrived consensus (George and Stern, 2002). But on the flip side, there are also concerns about bureaucratic actors continuing to pursue their agency’s ‘siloes’ view and policy preferences and promoting their agency’s interests vis a vis their political masters even in the context of crises of national importance, and about political actors keen to shift blame towards bureaucratic ‘lightning rods’ when difficult post-incident accountability conversations take place (Boin et al. 2010).

Crisis-induced blame games not only occur between bureaucratic agencies or across different levels of government but between political and administrative leaders within the executive branch (Resodihardjo 2020). In terms of table 2, civil servants may sometimes see fit (or feel forced) to maneuver so as to reduce their political principals’ ability to save their own skins in the face of crisis-induced accountability pressures by using communicative tactics such as *combating causation*, *combating capacity* and *scapegoating* designed to diffuse or shift blame towards operational actors or bureaucratic advisers. Let’s examine when and why this may be the case.

At one end of the spectrum stand ‘politically responsive bureaucrats’ who in effect take up their roles in a ‘functionally politicized’ (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014) manner. They perceive is as

their role to be as responsive to the wishes of the political executive as possible without publicly violating the norms preserving the neutrality of a merit bureaucracy. In this scenario we would expect the administrative executive to demonstrate unrelenting loyalty to the government of the day even when there is crisis-induced blame to be dispensed, potentially also to the point where blame acceptance even for political wrongdoings becomes accepted as part of the job - the bureaucrat as a political lightning rod (Ellis, 1994).

A similar line of thought emerges from stewardship theory. Originally launched as an alternative to classical principal-agent theories of political-administrative relations, this approach suggests that trust and cooperation rather than control and conflicting interest is at the heart of the relationship between the political and administrative executives (Schillemans and Bjurstrøm 2019:3 and 10). The reason being that principals and agents share the same interests and goals, as the agents wish to act 'in the best interest of their principals' (Davis, Schoorman, and Donaldson 1997:24) as those interests are perceived to align with the before mentioned 'agency ideology'.

The motivation of a steward is less about unremitting loyalty to political office-holders but more to realizing the mission of their organization to the extent that this overlaps with the policies pursued by the principal. Stewardship motives are probably more common in executive agencies whereas lightning rod dynamics are perhaps more likely to occur in departmental inner circles around ministers. The two drivers of bureaucratic behaviour can have diverging behavioural implications as crises fuel the stakes of political-administrative relations. When a situational crisis escalates into an institutional crisis and the political principal finds it less convenient to continue reciprocating the bureaucratic loyalty they have been led to expect, bureaucratic 'stewards' may be more likely than bureaucratic 'lightning rods' to push back (cf. table 1), turning into foes and resorting to 'bureaucratic politics'.

At the other end of the spectrum we find bureaucrats who – in a crisis that turns sour – may become a foe to the political principal. These are civil servants whose role-taking rests on the idea that the authority of political principals vis a vis public servants rests on negotiation rather than democratic entitlement. In such negotiations not only the performance, but also the reputation of the administrative executives and their organizations are valuable political assets for the administration (Carpenter and Krause, 2015). During crisis induced blame games these assets become aspects to be protected whether under attack horizontally from other bureaucrats or stakeholders in the environments or vertically from the political principals.

Echoing Downs's (1967) classic type of the bureaucrat as 'zealot' and in line with more recent theories that suggest bureaucrats cultivate the reputation of their organizations to maximize their autonomy relative to principals (Carpenter 2001; 2010), Rosenthal, 't Hart and Kouzmin (1991: 213) define 'bureau-political activity' as behaviour '...associated with a concern for self-interest, institutional power or overzealousness in pursuit of what is defined by different agencies as the 'common cause'.' In this scenario we would expect administrative executives during a crisis to be as much occupied with protecting their turf, the reputation of their organization and avoid responsibility and blame by primarily fighting against other bureaucrats. To the extent that such 'zealous' behavior comes with the risk of lack of information sharing across silos and across governance levels, lack of coordination and collaboration, such bureaucrats turn into foes or at least liabilities of political principals whose bureau-politicking can '...diminish governmental coping capabilities.' (Rosenthal, 't Hart and Kouzmin 1991:213). In this scenario 'politicised bureaucrats' constrain the political principal's crisis management options by contesting or

undermining their principals in the framing contest performed during the meaning-making and accountability phases if this framing goes against their interests.

### **Conclusion: How context matters**

In this chapter we have invited crisis communication scholars into the world of politics and public administration. We have done so because we think the two strands of literature may enrich each other by sharing their conceptual context to a bigger extent than is the case today.

According to Christopher Pollitt (2013: 9), context matters in at least two ways when social scientists want to investigate social and political phenomena. There is the ‘conceptual context’, which refers to ‘the means or tools’, i.e., the theoretical frameworks, concepts and methods applied to the object of study, in our case those of political crisis management research. And there is ‘factual context’ which refers to ‘entities or dimensions of social reality’, in our case the institutional arenas of politics and government in which political crisis management and communication are being performed. We suggest that the factual contexts of political and corporate crisis management are not so different as to warrant the continued existence of two largely unrelated conceptual contexts of theorizing and research tool development. Like politicians and bureaucrats, corporate actors find themselves in framing contests not only during in-crisis meaning-making game but also during the sometimes drawn-out post-crisis accountability game. Like political office-holders, corporate executives too face complex interrelationships with other actors in their governance structures, e.g. boards, owners and shareholders. In navigating those corporate governance structures during crises, they too may grope for loyalist lightning rods only to discover that other key players act more like assertive and (self-)protective stewards and zealots pursuing very different blame-management and lesson-drawing scripts.

We therefore encourage future research in both domains to explore the hitherto underexplored potential of cross-fertilization. We should consider undertaking systematic comparative studies of crisis management in the world of politics and in the corporate world. By thus identifying and explaining similarities as well as differences in governance contexts, crisis response challenges, leadership behaviours and communicative practices will, we believe, enhance our understanding of crisis communication in both spheres.

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