

Crisis communication during a national fire disaster

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This paper combines two topics: “government public relations and public crisis communication” with the “erosion of trust in (public) authorities”. It is difficult to discuss public crisis communication without considering the damages and implications to people’s trust in public and governmental institutions.

Purpose: Study a particular severe situation that forced the Portuguese government to react and communicate with the public to then draw conclusions about the consequences of that reaction/communication. Mainly, establish a correlation between the government’s performance, its response strategy to the crisis that followed a big fire and the growing lack of trust in political bodies.

Methodology: This research followed two sequential procedures - a stakeholder analysis and a content analysis applied to information materials collected from the Portuguese government official portal, between 17 June and 12 October 2017.

Findings: The results point out for a crisis response strategy that tries to avoid the citizen’s distrust emphasizing the government’s competence dealing with the fire issue and its consequences.

Research limitations: Being a sensitive issue, there were difficulties in the direct access to eventual goals and strategies behind the crisis management in the reported situation. In addition, because this is an exploratory study the citizen’s opinion is not yet included in this research stage.

Originality/value: Looking at the links between the issues of ‘crisis communication’ and ‘trust’ the study intends to bring awareness to the important role that public relations function can play in helping governments to manage communication in a crisis context, providing enlightening for future crisis that may harm the trust in political institutions.

Keywords: Government Public Relations; Crisis Communication; Political Trust; Digital Communication Platforms

Introduction

The present study intends to identify the response strategy of the Portuguese government during a major fire that caused the death of many people and relate it with the political crisis that followed with the resignation of the Internal Affairs Minister and several other national authorities. In this scenario public authorities and ministers were severely criticized and even the President of the Republic, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa, demanded for a rigorous assessment of the juridical contours of what happened, with a civil accountability of the public administration.

In the origin of this analysis was the assumption that there is a link between the responses given by political authorities during difficult situations and the lack of trust in political institutions. This assumption made it possible to combine the topic of 'government and public crisis communication' (subsumed in the main theme of the 25th edition of the Bledcom Symposium) with the 'erosion of trust in (public) authorities'.

It is important to begin by clarifying the context of the crisis under analysis in this work. First, 'crisis' and 'disaster' are seen as two different concepts, more so because the situation that underlies the study refers firstly to a natural disaster that arose unexpectedly and which has gradually been aggravated in such a way that exceeded the community and the authorities responsiveness (Jeggle, 2001, p. 318 in Yin and Jing, 2014:98). It was in the face of the events caused by the consequences of the Pedrógão Grande fire that the national authorities were confronted with a crisis, as they faced a "threat in their structure and values, given the uncertainty and pressure imposed by the disaster and were forced to take critical decisions" (Rosenthal, Charles and Hart, 1989, p. 10, in Yin and Jing, 2014:98), which turned out to be strongly contested and resulted in the departure of various governmental elements and senior officials who had the political confidence of the government. Thus this political crisis resulted on a lack of confidence in the authorities' actions

and their capacity to take decisions and deal with the various problems that have arisen. At the same time, it is difficult to clearly separate the responses to the disaster situation and the political crisis due to criticisms and accusations about the government's action during this disaster management.

This paper adopts the definition of crisis from Boin et al. (2005:2) that use this concept "when 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 their view there are three key components addressed: threat, uncertainty and urgency. This means we are in presence of a crisis when "core values or life-sustaining systems of a community come under threat" (Ibidem, 2005:2-4), which was true in the case of Pedrógão fire where occurred serious life-threats that resulted in severe losses that the authorities were not able to address properly. This ultimately caused structural and functional changes both in practices and policies making; also "the perception of threat is accompanied by a high degree of uncertainty" which in the situation in study had a particular impact on the victims who felt helpless to act and did not know what was going to happen to them nor how they would be rescued or how their situation would be solved. But also a great deal of uncertainty by the security authorities and political leaders that were not able to fulfil their main duty to protect citizens; finally the urgency of the whole situation has to do with time comprehension making the crisis real and in need of immediate attention and action.

Coombs also defines crisis as "the perception of an unpredictable event that threatens important expectations of stakeholders related to health, safety, environmental, and economic issues, and can seriously impact an organization's performance and generate negative outcomes" (Coombs, 2015:3). In this understanding there is a larger correspondence to the reality of private organizations,

although the focus of the concept lies in the same arguments.

There has been a wide discussion about crises, crisis management, disasters and catastrophes, whether in a prevention perspective or in a solution / outcome perspective (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short and Coombs, 2017) and resilience post-crisis. However the picture of crises and disasters is changing not only in its nature and consequences, but also in its frequency, as Arjen Boin (2009) warns in his introduction to a special issue in the *Review of Policy Research* focused on the new challenges of public crisis, risk and disaster management. The case is also addressed by Patrick Lagadec and Benjamin Topper (2012) in their article on "How Crises Model the Modern World." Of course, this change "poses new challenges to political-administrative elites" and forces us to rethink the research agenda in the public sector (Boin, 2009:367).

Boin specifically refers three types of challenges for crisis management and policy making: political-administrative challenges related with the development of structures and bodies able to face sudden adversity; the challenge of resilience where governments have to be competent in re-establishing some normality; the challenge of deep-thinking to innovate and cope with newer threats (Boin, 2009:370). Facing the job to deal with crisis and disasters in a successful way seems impossible, so five executive tasks are presented to deal with the difficulties: 1. preparing for indifference; 2. making sense of an emerging and evolving crisis; 3. managing large response networks; 4. offer credible answers; 5. learning under pressure (Ibidem, 2009:371-374).

Even so the assessment of the effectiveness in crisis management is possible: "if things happen with actions that minimize the impact of a threat; if the job gets done with cooperating entities; if work arounds when routines hamper; if authorities and political leaders fulfil the symbolic need for direction and guidance" (Boin et al., 2013:81).

In a text proposing a new agenda for crisis management research, Hart, Heyse, and Boin make their point by listing a set of observations attesting that all these challenges stem from three core trends in crisis management practice: the evolution from an industrial towards a risk society; the development from a heroic to a besieged crisis response; the change from episodic to continuous crisis management (Hart, Heyse, and Boin, 2001:182).

There is clearly a paradigm shift that crisis communication must follow to enable a more effective response to disaster and crisis management. Donald Macrae (2014) presents an innovative vision that proposes the development of a 'concern assessment' done in parallel with the more technical traditional risk analysis. In essence, what is proposed is that politicians take into account the public's anxiety and demonstrate knowledge and concern about the issues that embarrass the public at the time of giving their answers. This is a more humane and close understanding of the concerns of citizens and victims involved in disasters and crises. This is relevant because preparing a response to a disaster can become in itself a political problem.

As already noticed, this paper focuses specifically on a crisis that affects a political body that manages a wide range of public entities, managing public interests and wills. Interestingly, this is a poorly explored sector when it comes to research crisis management and crisis communication, being more common to find studies and theories that address the crisis from a perspective of private corporations or NGOs and their "efforts in sustaining and restoring image and trust" (Olsson, 2014:113).

Due to this trend in the Crisis Communication research, less attention has been paid to the differentiated nature of public communication and corporate communication in response to crises (Liu and Horsley, 2007; Tracy, 2007 in Olsson, 2014:113), which in itself justifies the contribution of the present study. Boin et al. (2005:70) also notice that

much of the literature in crisis communication is “embedded in management and public relations analysis in the corporate sector” and is “missing a systematic understanding of the specific challenges of crisis communication in the public sector”.

Given the particular interest of the government sector vis-à-vis its large-scale crisis and disaster management responsibilities and the need of complex communication structures able to address issues in times of crisis, it is relevant to further develop studies on new approaches within crisis communication research beyond its traditional focus (Olsson, 2014: 113).

Political Trust in a Crisis Context

Distrust in democracy and in democratic institutions it is not a recent phenomenon but due to recurrent economic crises and also because of the increasing delegitimation of the national political authorities regarding international decision bodies, we’ve been facing a collapse of trust in government and public institutions (van der Meer, 2017; Edelman, 2017; Randeria in Bradley, 2017). There are many studies and analysis that point out to democratic systems all around the world facing pressure and countercharge. Today with more transparent societies, more informed citizens and growing distrust in politicians and government regulations there are some voices fearing we reached a tipping point where “liberal democracy may be coming to an end” (Bradley, 2017:online). For the director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy, Simon Bradley, this may be a quite radical statement. He believes that in a certain way “the spread of democracy has turned into a crises of democracy” due to different factors like: (1) new media and modern communication, (2) memory failure of totalitarian regimes (what he calls ‘historical amnesia’), (3) overpromising of political bodies, (4) inequalities with failure of the welfare state (Ibidem, 2017:online). More troubling is that citizens now may feel that their vote doesn’t deliver social or economic improvements because

politicians have no more power to meet the guidelines demanded by global markets and international institutions. They also demand for more “accountability of authorities” and watch the “raise of the citizen consumer” whose interactions with the public services is seen only as a way to fulfil his needs faster and with higher quality, narrowing the exercise of authority from those who represent us (Hurenkamp et al., 2012:43).

All of this leads to resentment and disenchantment that causes lack of trust in political elites and institutions (Bradley, 2017:online). Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington and Joji Watanuki first brought this issue to attention when they claimed the “increasing delegitimation of authority” in their 1975 report “*The Crisis of Democracy*”.

“Dissatisfaction with and lack of confidence in the functioning of the institutions of democratic government have thus now become widespread in Trilateral countries. Yet with all this dissatisfaction, no significant support has yet developed for any alternative image of how to organize the politics of a highly industrialized society” (Crozier et al., 1975:158-159).

This dissatisfaction with political bodies was recently introduced by Jean-Claude Juncker, former president of the European Committee, when he stated that one of the biggest problems of the EU is precisely the “public negativity about politics and politicians” (Juncker, 2014 in van der Meer, 2017:2). In the same way, a study from the Portuguese Society Observatory pointed out that almost 60% of Portuguese citizens distrust the government for solving both national and international problems (Vale and Moreira, 2016). *This is why different politicians and researchers have appealed to the political class moralization in order to recover people’s trust.*

The narrative about the so-called ‘democratic recession’ (Bradley, 2017) has prevailed over several decades leading to research and debate worldwide (Citrin and Luks, 2001:25 in van der Meer, 2017) and it is based in the as-

sumption that political trust is fundamental for democracy and political order (Schneider, 2016:964; Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017).

Without trust in democratic governance we may risk the stability, efficiency and quality of representative governance and its institutions - whether being the parliament, political parties, local or central government structures, courts, law enforcement bodies and individual actors (Dalton, 2004; Tebaldi and Calaresu, 2016; van der Meer, 2017; Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017).

Also professor Russell J. Dalton in his book *“Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies”* worries that the political distrust in the democratic system may “undermine the democratic process itself” (Dalton, 2004:157 in van der Meer, 2017:2). Such concerns have echoed through many researches, public speeches and opinion makers although is yet to be presented an alternative vision (van der Meer, 2017; Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017).

In a theoretical approach, van der Meer (2007:4) considers three variant perspectives of this narrative that ties the lack of political trust with the “democratic malaise”: (1) the survival of democracies is at risk with lack of political trust, a concern originated in the 1970s when scientists feared for the stability of regimes; (2) the predicted failure of the democratic system didn't happen and it is possible that representative regimes can perpetuate themselves with low rates of trust provided that they can undergo a reconfiguration, an argument that was set out in the 1990s; (3) the assumption that distrust in politics does not cause a severe rick or crisis to democracy but simply calls the attention for something that is not being solved accordingly with the publics expectations.

Maybe these variant perspectives relay on different understandings about what actually is political trust. In fact, is not possible to deny the importance of political trust as a highly normative charged concept but it

is very difficult to meet consensus about its definition and measurement (Levi and Stoker, 2000:475; Schneider, 2016:964). In the present research, political trust is considered “a basic evaluative orientation toward the government founded on how well it operates according to people's normative expectations” (Hetherington, 1998:791). Listhaug's (1990) definition of trust also conforms to this setting:

“Trust ... reflects evaluations of whether or not political authorities and institutions are performing in accordance with normative expectations held by the public. Citizen expectations of how government should operate include, among other criteria, that it must be fair, equitable, honest, efficient, and responsive to society's needs” (Listhaug, 1990:358 in Levi and Stoker, 2000:498).

What sustains public trust in political authorities is a relationship between those who govern and those that are governed – wherein the first reach out for public support to their programs while the second respond by voting and maintaining the status quo of the elites that govern. Therefore, trust can be defined as the “citizens' support for political institutions such as government and parliament in the face of uncertainty about or vulnerability to the actions of these institutions” (van der Meer, 2017:1).

Margaret Levi and Laura Stoker both refer the importance of distinguishing between the objects or targets of trust (2000:498). In their article ‘Political Trust and Trustworthiness’ they explore the meaning of these two multi-level concepts (Weatherford, 1992 in Levi and Stoker: 2000:475) and relate them with the notions of ‘participation’, ‘cooperation’ and ‘vote’. For them political and social trust is also relational, unconditional and understood dichotomously (we can trust or distrust) (Levi and Stoker: 2000:476).

If a society trusts both the competence and the loyalty of elected representatives and believes in the work delivered by the public and political entities it is more likely to abide

by their decisions and support their policies or political measures. If citizens trust political institutions they also will perceive them as more legitimate (Tyler and Huo, 2002 in Marien and Hooghe, 2011:268).

Where there is mistrust and skepticism citizens may become more engaged and more critical to political activities. However if mistrust turns into widespread distrust we will have demoralized and disenchanted citizens that reject the current system favoring "the emergence of anti-system political parties" (Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017:1).

Levi and Stoker's (2000:501) study concludes that there is a coincidence between the way people judge politicians and governments and their political engagement, their vote, their support to policies or institutional reforms, their compliance to authority and even the moral behavior of the whole community.

One major problem about measuring trust or trustworthiness and validate results from studies in this field as to do with the difficulty in obtaining reliable surveys that can deliver equivalent results in different cultural and national contexts (Levi and Stoker, 2000; Schneider, 2016; van der Meer, 2017). Irena Schneider (2016:967) believes that despite political trust can be "considered an important object of study it currently rests on a weak theoretical and empirical foundation". First, there are data limitations because most surveys only focus on certain indicators comprehensive only for certain population (Schneider, 2016:965). Not always the same elements and indicators have the same meaning across different countries, nor the concepts of trust are the same to all populations or even to all classes of citizens. Sometimes even political institutions are very unlike depending on different regimes. For instance, there are many distinct ways to evaluate the conduct of a President or the performance of a political party, and many ways to consider what corruption and fraud are depending on the cultural background and values. Secondly, there are different dimensions from which we can judge the value of the subject for us

to trust on its performance: do we trust on their "capacity to govern" or do we trust on the "outcome of their governance"? (Tebaldi and Calaresu, 2015). We have also to consider the possible study subfields that point out to macro and micro-level approaches to the decline of political trust (Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017:7-8) that result on different interpretations for a correlate phenomenon.

Despite some limitations found in the literature there are recent developments in this field with "enhanced knowledge about the complexity of political trust" and "progress in a wide range of subfields, comprising theoretical accounts about the nature of political trust and its democratic relevance (...) providing broader and more detailed empirical insights" (Zmerli and van der Meer, 2017:2-3).

The concept of political trust may become even more crucial when in presence of a crisis context such as the one discussed in this paper - the political crisis that followed the Pedrogão Grande fire. In this situation, how the government responded? What strategies were used? How the government should react without undermining the citizen's confidence?

Crisis is, in fact, a complex concept with many different approaches. A crisis can strike at any moment, at any organization, putting at risk people's lives and livelihoods. Crisis are especially troubling for governments because public authorities are responsible for ensuring people's health and safety. For government officials and their communication professionals a crisis represents an utmost attention by the media and a strong citizen scrutiny during and after a crisis (Lee et al., 2012:111).

Coombs (2015) defends the importance of crisis management to combat crisis and lessen damage. In this context, he identifies four key steps to take in account when managing crisis: prevention, preparation, response and revision.

In particular, response strategies - the focus

of this study – as part of the communication system are used to “achieve outcomes related to reducing the negative impact of the crisis” (Coombs, 2015:6). It seems clear that responses are able to influence the way stakeholders interpret a crisis and therefore affects their levels of trust in government’s performance.

Coombs (2004, 2015) defines the reactions taken by an organization to deal with a crisis as ‘crisis response strategies’. These responses include all strategies taken since the beginning of the crisis and all that has been done and said.

To be effective, crisis responses content usually takes into account three key components: (1) instructing information, that give essential guidelines to protect stakeholders physically during the crisis; (2) adjusting information, that explain what and why has happened, helping stakeholders to deal emotionally with the impact of the crisis; and (3) reputational management, that tries to avoid the negative effects in organizational reputation (Coombs, 2015:139). During a crisis, it is important to minimize the impact of transmitted messages and thus contribute to the success of the entire crisis management process. However, this also implies a good coordination between the type of response and the specific crisis, namely (a) form a taxonomy of crisis types, (b) form a taxonomy of crisis responses, and (c) develop a system to match appropriate responses to crisis situations (Coombs, 2004).

In the political context, administrative authorities face many challenges when it comes to manage a crisis but in literature frequently the emphasis is more on the desired performance/response and less on the actual contingences of the crisis. By doing so scholars tend to pay more attention to certain categories that divide the needed tasks into groups of capacities that must be operated to successfully manage crises (Backman and Rhinard, 2017:2) like those stated by Coombs - “prevention,” “preparation,” “response,” and “recovery”. Recently more seven strategic ac-

tivities critical for the effective and legitimate management of crises have been presented: detection, sense-making, decision-making, coordination, meaning-making, communication, and accountability (Boin et al., 2013; Boin et al., 2005:139-140). Here is assumed that when public authorities or political leaders perform these activities and also when they render account for what has happened they naturally will gain more acceptance for their decision-making. This political accountability, a key institutional practice in disaster or crisis management, helps to build public support and public trust in the functioning of institutions (Boin et al., 2005:13-14). Ultimately this increases legitimacy of the institutions involved in those activities (Backman and Rhinard, 2017:2).

For the present research were adapted the five possible responses to crisis suggested by Coombs and Holladay (1996), in order to try to get stakeholders to better judge the performance of a company or entity or to build a case favoring the organization or persons involved in a certain crisis situation. A brief description of these categories can be found in the methodology section.

To choose the proper type of responses for a certain situation it is important to know the appropriate meaning-making and have communication capacities to “formulate a message of what has happened in relation to the crisis, providing advice. It is also important to explaining measures taken in order to achieve a sense that leaders are in control of the situation” and at the same time knowing what are the most effective means to “broadcast a message regarding the risk, threat, or crisis to selected audiences such as the public, the media, victims, etc.” (Boin, et al., 2016 in Backman and Rhinard, 2017:3).

This is why the present study is supported on the responses given in a difficult moment. *The Institute For Public Relations* considers a crises response “what management does and says after the crisis hits”. Coombs says exactly the same but adds that “a crisis response can either improve or make the crisis situa-

tion worse for a corporation and its various stakeholders (Coombs et al., 2010). Thus it is important to see how things happen in practice by trying to increase the evidence-based knowledge that will later serve to help professionals responsible for communication management to solve problems in crisis situations (Coombs, 2014:2).

Methodology

The purpose of the present exploratory study is to contribute to the knowledge of political trust in a crisis context through the observation of a real situation – Pedrógão Grande fire. So, the main research question is: what was the communication strategy followed by the Portuguese Government during the Pedrógão Grande crisis?

To fulfil this purpose it was essential to collect the formal messages available in the official government portal during the crisis period and then operationalize the research in three stages:

1. Mapping all stakeholders affected;
2. Identify trust marks in the material;
3. Cross the data with the response strategies categories to verify links between both issues.

The material selected consisted in two types of written documents available in the government portal: 26 press releases and 71 news logs. In this digital channel it is possible to find a section with all the press releases issued and another section with a news log where all the public messages and measures done by the government are recorded on a daily basis. The portal is thus an official channel that allows citizens to be informed about the government's agenda and policies.

The time line was 17th June to 12th October – the period between the date of the fire and the release of the Report prepared by the Independent Technical Commission appointed by the Parliament to investigate de fire of Pedrógão Grande. The option for this material

had to do with its accessibility and its official character.

The main procedure used to analyse this material was a content analysis. It started with an issue classification (data-driven) of the material (both press-releases and news logs available at the portal) taking into account the main subject/theme to which it refers and then built a concept-driven coding frame adapted from the Trust Model presented by Tom W. van der Meer (2017).

According to the recommend content analysis methodology (Schreier, 2012) three main steps were followed: a) divided the units of analysis into units of coding, marking keywords and separating the relevant parts of the material to be considered for analysis; b) decided the criterion of segmentation (a thematic criterion); c) applied the criterion and inserted the units of coding into the defined categories.

In this next section will be presented the different categories that guided the analysis of the subjects under study.

Stakeholder Analysis

A Power-Interest Grid identifying all entities implicated in the situation. To understand better the distribution of the different categories of stakeholders throughout the two axes of power or interest, four quadrants of the grid were define (Table 1):

Issue classification

Definition of six categories used to classify all materials (both press releases and portal news) taking into account the main subject/theme to which they refer (Table 2):

Categories of Trust

Van der Meer's model (2017) defines several categories that are the causes for motivation of trust and distrust. This frame was adapted from his proposal of six categories (Table 3):

Table 1: Power Interest Grid

<p>High Power / High Interest (PLAYERS) – These stakeholders are essential for the success of the government strategy to manage the crisis. So they should be prioritise. They are strong players with political interest in forming alliances or have proximity relationships with the government. In addition, they are highly motivated to solve the situation and to support the government initiatives and diligences in this issue of Pedrógão Grande fire. They also have high power because they have authority; control resources and can influence the government actions. They possess resources that the government requires for solving the situation whether they are financial, technology/equipment or legislative and political resources. It is important that the Portuguese government continue to develop a partnership approach and maintain a dynamic and continuous monitoring of these stakeholders.</p>
<p>High Power / Low Interest (CONTEST SETTERS) – These stakeholders are independent from any government and have no particular political interest in supporting this government. They also have great authority to influence the government strategy. They can contribute to the situation without the need or the will to have a partnership relation with the government entities. They influence the context and because of that, these high power and low interest stakeholders may pose some barriers to the government strategy/work through their disinterest or neutrality. Therefore, it is important to take a positive approach, keeping them informed and increasing their interest. They should also be manage and monitor their activity closely.</p>
<p>High Interest / Low Power (SUBJECTS) – These stakeholders have high interest in the political resolutions that the government can present to solve the crisis situation. Therefore, they hope the government serves their interest. On the other hand, they have little power, and mainly depend on the government for financing and support. It is important the government clearly identify these stakeholders to protect them and keep them satisfied.</p>
<p>Low Interest / Low Power (CROWD) – These stakeholders have both low interest in the government and low power to influence its actions. They do their job anyway independently from the government but are somehow limited in what they can achieve to solve the situation. It is important to keep them in view and to monitor them but with minimum spent.</p>

Table 2: Categories of Issue Classification

<p>Means of Combat - News and Announcements that referred the means of combat in the field - the number of effective and operational firemen and mechanisms made available to face the situation with the populations; security forces involved, not only in the direct fight against the fire, but in the support to the populations guaranteeing their security and also in the actions of containment of the fires and operations of aftermath; the official mechanisms available to the Government such as the Declaration of State of Calamity or the Dispatches that extended the critical period of the fires; and also the coordination of European action in the fight against fires.</p>
<p>Social Help - News and press-releases related to the solidarity and social assistance provided, namely the medical support provided and the Health Program created for 2 years to support the victims; the installation of the Social Security Operational Centres in the different places affected by the fires; the information about the activities in the zones of the fires; the opening of the National Social Emergency Line; the creation of the Mental Health Monitoring Committee; and the mobile units of public services to the citizen in the villages and parishes affected by the fires.</p>
<p>Victims - Government decrees for national mourning or the messages of condolence for the victims and regrets to all for the tragedy that occurred in the fire of Pedrógão Grande, whether in the figure of the prime minister or in the words of any of the remaining ministers of the executive. It also includes references to the official process of identification and accounting of the number of victims, information on legal procedures, as well as calls for confidence and cooperation with authorities.</p>
<p>Clarification - Orders issued by the Government to request clarification from the various entities on what would have been the origin of the tragedy and the respective responses, documents, inquiries and reports on the fires, which were presented until the culmination of the Final Report prepared by the Independent Technical Commission on the fire of Pedrógão Grande; also includes dispatches on the termination of duties of figures with official responsibilities. This makes them accountable for some of the things that didn't went well.</p>
<p>Forest Reform - References to the Regional Plans of Forest Management that have been proposed by the governmental authorities, as well as all initiatives to revitalize and organize the territories affected by the fires.</p>
<p>Measures and Financial Support - Initiatives created by the Government to deal with this and to avoid future situations, namely directives for the various municipalities affected to develop a forest re-ordering of the region; the presentation of Revitalization Programs; the establishment of new rules for the forest industry, and preventive measures for fire crime; lines of funding and requalification, such as the request for funds to the EU, the 'Permanent Forestry Fund', the 'Municipal Emergency Fund', the 'REVITA Fund', the 'Rural Development Program', the Protocols with various forms of solidarity and support.</p>

Table 3: Categories of Trust

Competence - Use of words or expressions that reflect the competence of the government or the relevance and adequacy of its decisions and measures to solve the crisis. In other words, those contents that seek to demonstrate the capacity to respond to the situation.
Care - Use of words or expressions that indicate sadness, concern and empathy with the citizens showing commotion, regret and solidarity in the face of the consequences of the tragedy. Also demonstrations of trust, thanks and praise to all those who cooperated in supporting the victims.
Reliability - Use of words or phrases that express involvement, monitoring of the situation on the ground and accountability of the government to the situation. References of cooperation with other entities demonstrating availability, support and transmission of the necessary information.
Accountability - Use of future-oriented action verbs to express the results of decisions and measures taken to solve the situation in order to reinforce confidence in these actions and show all government's effort to prevent further crisis situations. Account is also taken of the forward-looking statements for risk prevention.
Skepticism - Use of words or phrases that try to avoid the judgment or distrust of citizens and reestablish confidence and support to the government, namely clarifying facts and misunderstandings and denying wrong information that have been made public through the several media. There are also expressions in which the Government point the responsibility of the situation to the lack of initiative previous governments, thus demarcating itself from possible responsibilities.
The cynicism (attitude that assumes the worst of the nature of political actors as reflected in their perceived incompetence and selfishness), although integrating Tom W. van der Meer's model, was not included in the coding framework because it is only possible to apply this category in the analysis of texts produced by the media or by the citizens themselves.

Table 4: Types of responses

Denial, a strategy where the government could disclaim any responsibility or blame for the way it monitored and managed the fire and ensured support for the populations;
Distance, a strategy to follow if the government wanted to detach or disassociate itself from the things that gone wrong during and after the fire;
Ingratiation, assures a response that intends to gain public support and approval for the government actions;
Mortification, if the government wanted to gain forgiveness which means they had to assume responsibility for what occurred;
Suffering, a strategy where the government would assume itself as a victim in the crisis that followed the fires.

Categories of Response Strategies

Coombs and Holladay (1996:284) define the following typology of responses (Table 4):

Results and Discussion

Starting with the stakeholders analysis it was possible to identify 30 categories of individuals and entities affected by the crisis ranging from those that are dependent from the solutions the authorities find for the situation (*Subjects*) and those that support those solutions (*Players*), or even those that simply are involved in the fire issue (*Contest Setters* and *Crowd*).

From the 16 ministries that constitute the XXI Constitutional Government in Portugal the messages conveyed reported the involvement of 11 ministries. In addition, there are references to numerous other government bodies, their offices (General-Secretary), their State Secretaries and all other Figures, Authorities, Institutes, Entities, Centres, Councils, Agencies, Services, Technicians that are related or dependent from the several ministries. This reflects an enormous effort of coordination and involvement of the government in dealing with the situation, which may be seen as a good indicator of the effectiveness of crisis management according to Boin et al. (2013:81), who believe that one of the evidences of a good response lies in "forging

Table 5: Stakeholders Analysis - Power and Interest Grid. Source: Adapted from Ackermann and Eden (2011)

HIGH interest / LOW power	<p style="text-align: center;">SUBJECTS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - City Councils; City Hall Presidents; Township Councils - Community - Private enterprises and PMEs affected by fires - National Association of Portuguese Municipalities & National Association of Township - Entities of the agricultural sector (Portuguese Confederation of Farmers; Order of Veterinarians; Portuguese Association of Animal Compound Feeding-stuffs) - Portuguese Institute of the Sea and the Atmosphere - Agency for the Tourist Development of the Schist Villages - Telecommunications Institute - Regional Tourism Authority of Central Portugal - Institute for Mobility and Transport - Regional Tourism Authority of Central Portugal - Portuguese Firefighters League - INDRA (Company in technology consultancy) - KPMG Portugal (Audit and advisory Co.) 	<p style="text-align: center;">PLAYERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Air Force: Portugal; Italy; Spain; France (geopolitics, international political interest for future alliances) - Armed Force (strategic interest in the government' support) - Public Ministry (close political relations) - Professional Orders & Professional Associations (interest in good political relations) - European Commission (recognizes political interest in the government) - Parliament (has political influence in the government) - The State Bank: (political appointed administrators) - International Presidents and Prime-Ministers (geopolitics, international political interest for future alliances)
LOW interest - LOW power	<p style="text-align: center;">CROWD</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Union of Portuguese Misericórdias & Consecrated Houses of Misericórdia - Catholic Church - Diocesan Caritas - Caloust Gulbenkian Foundation - Anonymous civil society (helping) 	<p style="text-align: center;">CONTEST SETTERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - President of the Portuguese Republic (independent from the government) - Independent Technical Commission for Fire Analysis of Pedrógão Grande (no political liaisons) - Republican National Guard (GNR) (supposedly independent from any political interest) - Judiciary Police & Judicial Authorities (supposedly independent from any political interest) - Media (supposedly independent from any political interest)

cooperation between previously unrelated agents”.

This stakeholder analysis proves to be coherent with the trust analysis made from the government's messages that will be shown next. They focus more attention on the 'Subject stakeholder' to whom they direct their main support and initiatives (Table 5). The government strives to show 'competence' by compensating the affected families and ruined businesses and at the same time it improves the forest requalification measures and develops a strategy for local economic recovery.

In the analysis of the issue classification, the main focus refers to the category 'Measures and Financial Support' both in the information conveyed in the press releases and in the government portal news, as shown in Graphic 1. Here there is also a coherence with the results from the trust categories once 'Competence' has the higher frequency either in the press releases or in the portal news (Graphics 3 and 4). This points out to a concern in showing all the work the government has done to solve the crisis, creating measures to help all citizens affected after the fires. Almost all ministries take action by implementing revitalization measures, preventive action to avoid future disasters, creating decrees, establishing programs of help and development, organizing funds and protocols. In addition, the government is making sure that all his efforts are visible and announced to the public.

At the same time 'Social Help' and 'Clarification' are the next issues most mentioned in the Press Releases, while the portal news log give more focus to 'Means of Combat', 'Social Help' and 'Forest Reform' - which also conveys the same idea of 'Competence'. The values registered in these categories show the work and endeavour of the official authorities that are in dependence from the governmental bodies (previously identified in the stakeholders' analysis). This is in line with Boin when he states that "in fact, the crisis response in modern society is best characterized in

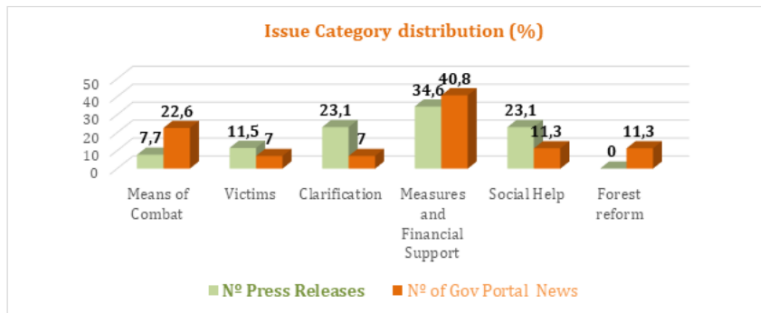
terms of network comprising a wide variety of response organizations that usually do not work together during 'normal times'" (Boin, 2009:372).

The category 'clarification' also has a great significance in the information transmitted in the press releases (Graphic 1) which may denote they do not fear to be made accountable for all the processes they are involved.

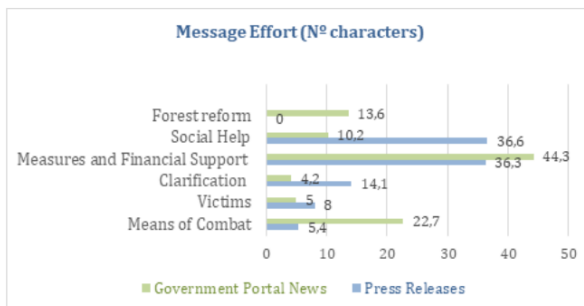
Graphic 2 presents the categories that reflected more the government concerns - that is themes/ messages with a greater development and communication effort. These conclusions result from the sum of the characters of each unit of analysis. The portal news give more importance to information about 'Measures and Financial Support' and 'Means of Combat' (summing both categories 67% of the total of characters) while the press releases give more information about 'Social Help' and 'Measures and Financial Support' (summing 72,9%).

Graphics 3 and 4 refer to political trust categories and notices that 'Competence' is the category with more units either in press releases or in portal news. Clearly, the government's option was to present new measures (economical, legal...) avoiding references to less positive issues on the subject that might affect or put in doubt the government's performance. This can be related to a crisis response strategy of 'Ingratiation' once it states that the government "is taking some kind of remedial action (e.g., offer compensation to victims or create new practices to prevent a crisis event from repeating)" (Coombs, 1996:284).

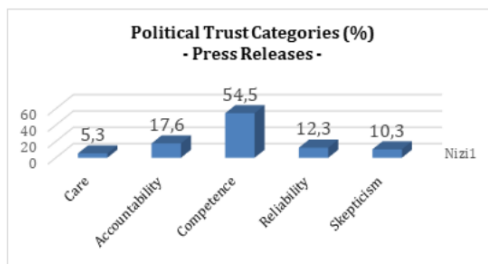
The second trust category most referred is 'Accountability', which indicates a concern in taking responsibility to solve the problem through support, on the spot monitoring and coordination with other entities but without taking blame, or even apologize. This may be a strategy to capture and maintain the trust of citizens. This also points to a 'Distance' response strategy in which the government accepts the crisis but tries to weaken possible



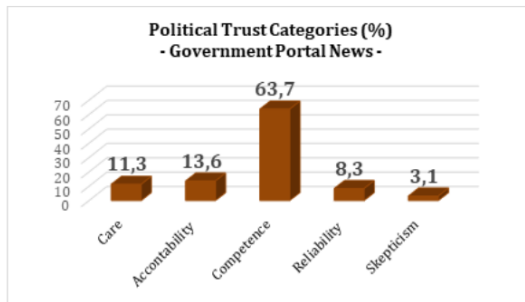
Graphic 1



Graphic 2



Graphic 3



Graphic 4

links with its performance and the dimension of the crisis.

It is also curious to note that the *'Skepticism'* category has more units than the *'Care'* category which can point out for a priority in clarifying misunderstandings and misinformation that may blame the government, then showing empathy for the victims. The strategy followed clearly avoid *'Mortification'* and *'Suffering'*.

Final Remarks

It is essentially through their discursive practices that stakeholders get to know the organizations and keep in touch with their reality. So, the image they build and the relationships they establish must be a reflex of what those organizations say about their achievements.

Increasingly, the messages transmitted by the organizations or institutions must be adapted to the needs of more demanding and enlightened audiences, with concerns and expectations that are not satisfied with a superficial discourse. They require that this discourse presents valid arguments and concrete facts that legitimize their performance, proving that organizations/entities are useful, competent and reliable, fulfilling their mission and objectives legitimately.

In the context of political communication - the focus of this research - power relations,

legitimacy and trust are factors that must be taken into account when analyzing communications and messages from these entities.

In a crisis situation, these issues are even more important. According to Coombs (1996:280) "communication can be used to influence how stakeholders interpret a crisis and the organization in crisis".

There are no neutral words. Each word, each utterance can acquire different meanings according to the way the sender and the receiver interpret them. Communication relations can be defined as 'linguistic exchanges', but also as relations of symbolic power where there are relations of force between the speakers and the groups to which they are addressed (Bourdieu, 1998: 13-14).

This exploratory research tried to identify keywords (in the press releases and in the government portal news) that could allow the understanding of how the government produced its messages during the period of crisis, knowing that this had impact in the levels of citizen's trust. The discursive options of governmental entities can denote strategic intentions and options as well as point out to possible effects on their stakeholders. In a crisis situation it is important take into account that "efforts to impart accurate, accessible information, which can be used as the basis for appropriate action, may encounter an anxious and even fearful audience. Stress

and arousal can easily lead to the messages of leaders being misinterpreted and distorted –especially among those parts of the audience who do not see government as their ally” (Boin 2009:373).

In this particular analysis of the Pedrógão Grande fire it is possible to observe that the Portuguese government chose to win people trust mainly using a strategy based on confidence and commitment messages in its communications, which is coherent with an ingratiating response to crisis situations. The government chose to demonstrate a position of strength by appearing to the public as one who is able to find solutions and solve problems when facing adversity, avoiding the reference of possible failures in their performance. As Boin advocates, “one of the most crucial leadership tasks during a crisis is to explain what is happening and what leaders are doing to manage the crisis. They must offer a convincing rationale, which generates public and political support for their crisis management efforts” (Boin, 2009:373). Has this strategy had the desired effect in the case of Pedrógão fire?

One of the research limitations is the lack of an analysis of the citizen’s opinion and the possible impacts of this government’s strategy. It is important to grasp the citizen’s reaction to the government messages in mass media and social media to cross these results and then measure the levels of political trust after the crisis. This could be the next step of this study.

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