Applying Care to Political Public Relations: Crisis Communication Following the Terrorist Attack in New Zealand

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Abstract

Care is not a word generally associated with political crises. However, following the mosques massacre in New Zealand, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was found to have used care and a feminist approach to political communication that served to unite rather than divide her country following this racially motivated terrorist attack. There is much literature on corporate crises, but this paper adds to the dearth of literature on political crises in a public interest context. Grounded in a consideration of care and agenda building theories, it reveals that a caring approach to political communication (both verbal and nonverbal) following an act of terrorism can influence the media agenda and by extension public opinion.

Introduction

How should a head of state respond to an act of terror on the country's citizens? This is a question that every government should be prepared to answer, as sporadic acts of terror are real phenomena facing countries. From high profile acts of terror such as the New York City World Trade Center tragedy of September 11, 2001, in the United States to domestic terrorism such as the Charleston Church massacre on June 15, 2015, to the more recent Christchurch mosques shootings on March 15, 2019, in New Zealand, political and administrative leaders are under

pressure to calm fears, identify culprits, act, and restore normalcy. Such crises require effective communication by government and public authorities, not only because citizens and victims in times of crises typically look to the government for leadership, but because the crises may quickly turn into a symbolic contest over the meaning of the crisis, in which diverse publics— citizens, journalists, members of parliament, and other groups on the political stage that monitor and influence the behavior of leaders—make use of (social) media venues, offering competing interpretations (Boin et al., 2016; Canel & Sanders, 2010; Christensen et al., 2013). Some scholars, therefore, have argued that effective crisis response cannot be brought about by simply "doing the right thing"; leaders must strategically manage the meaning-making process, that is, making efforts "to reduce public and political uncertainty and inspire confidence in crisis leaders by formulating and imposing a convincing narrative" (Boin et al., 2016, p. 79).

Although many scholars have pointed to the strategic dimension of governmental response to terrorist attacks (Boin et al., 2016; Canel, 2012; Canel & Sanders, 2010; Sparks et al., 2005), few have studied this type of crisis communication from a public relations or public interest perspective. Moreover, the fact that the inquiry of crisis communication within the public relations field has primarily taken a corporate and practitioners' perspective (Coombs, 2015; Ulmer et al., 2010) further underlines the need for exposing how government officials and political leaders use strategic communication to shape views and sentiments of the public and political environment.

The purpose of this study, accordingly, was to fill the lacuna in research and generate an understanding of political crisis communication in response to terrorist attacks from a public relations perspective through an investigation of the crisis response of New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern following the Christchurch mosques shootings. In particular, the study evaluated the substance of the government's crisis communication through the lens of agenda building theory, which is an ideal framework to develop a better understanding of the intersection of political public relations and crisis communication.

Further, drawing on the Applied Model of Care Considerations (AMCC) (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018), this study explores how a feminist approach to strategic crisis communication by a woman politician influences the media agenda and hence public opinion. Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) suggest that the AMCC feminist orientation is a more ethical approach to crisis communication when acting in the public's interest than what they term the traditional masculine approach.

Literature review

Political public relations

Political public relations practice dates back centuries (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011). However, scholarship lags in bridging theoretical gaps between political public relations and related social

science areas such as public relations and political communication (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2019). Political public relations is defined as "the management process by which an actor for political purposes, through communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with key publics and stakeholders to help support its mission and achieve its goals" (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011, p. 8). Such actors can include governments (Albishri et al., 2019), state-owned media (Zhang et al., 2017), political candidates (Kim et al., 2011), political parties (Aras, 2018), interest groups (Neil et al., 2016), corporate CEOs (Lan et al., 2020), and even citizens (Krishna et al., 2020). Those actors are crucial in recognizing the key stakeholders and issues and how they are framed in media coverage and public discourse (Lan et al., 2020).

Scholars have emphasized the strategic and management role of political public relations in affecting political issues, processes, and public opinion related to political matters. However, political public relations is largely identified in practice by its media relations function (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2019). Furthermore, a key feature of political public relations is that it is purposeful, and its main goal is to influence the media agenda and framing of issues (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2019). However, the authors cautioned that despite politicians' role in shaping news, political public relations does not equate to news management as its remit is much broader.

Like many other fields of mass communication, political public relations theory and practice have evolved with the adoption of digital communication and social media as strategic tools by political actors. Facebook, Twitter, and many other platforms have become important domains for sharing and receiving political information, providing a new arena for competition among political actors (Dimitrova & Matthes, 2018). Previous meta-analysis studies have provided conflicting evidence on the influence of using digital channels to increase political engagement and participation (Boulianne, 2009, 2015; Skoric et al., 2016). Thus, such tools should not be seen as replacing, but rather complementing, traditional channels of political communication (Albishri et al., 2019).

Political public relations and crises

The current study focuses on how political communication was used within the context of a terrorist crisis. Section 2656f(d) of Title 22 of the United States Code defines terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience" (22 U.S.C. § 2656f(d)). This definition has three elements that distinguish terrorism from other acts of violence—the act is politically motivated, it is directed toward noncombatants, and finally, it is done by a subnational group or clandestine agent meaning that countries do not commit terrorist acts even when their actions hurt civilians (Ruby, 2002). This study adopted this definition since it fits the character of the act of terrorism committed in Christchurch.

The public relations literature on crises focuses mainly on corporate crises defining these phenomena as being disruptive of operations and having financial and reputational implications

(Coombs, 2002; Howell & Miller, 2006). Coombs (2002) contributes the concept of a threat grid in which two types of threats were identified—the operational threat and the reputational threat. Other typologies of crises explicated in management literature are man-made and natural causation (Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1993), man-made, natural, and social (Rike, 2003), and, conventional, unexpected, intractable, and fundamental (Gundel, 2005). Rosenthal and Kouzmin (1993) pointed out that there is no strict difference between corporate and public crises and that corporate crises may become public-private crises based on their scope such as the 2010 British Petroleum oil spill. Fundamental, however, is what are crises— "events and processes featuring threat, uncertainty, and urgency" (p. 1) and how they should be managed— "prevention and mitigation, preparation and planning, response and decision making and recovery, consolidation and change" (p. 6).

The difference between corporate and political crises has been explained as dimensions in which crises may be operational-focus or symbolic-focus (Coombs, 2019). Operational crises are those that can have a direct impact on the organization's survival, while symbolic crises are those played out in public. Terrorist attacks then fit the latter. For this type of crisis, the response may be as important as the crisis itself, as the responder's performance is being evaluated by stakeholders (Coombs, 2019). According to Edelman (1964), symbolic forms of communication can influence political perception and public opinion. Extending this thesis to the crisis management context, Hart (1993) argued that crises are not only perceptual but an affective category. In a crisis the popular expectation is for leaders to be compassionate toward victims, which should be demonstrated both verbally and tangibly. However, political leaders have been found to be guilty of unrealistic promises in trying to comfort victims (Boin et al., 2016).

Although heads of corporations seek to avoid crises, politicians appear to thrive on them (Coombs, 2019). For example, in 2001 President George W. Bush was said to have had a rocky start after his slim political victory, and the mayor of New York, Rudy Giuliani, was "poised to go down in history as a political failure," but they both emerged from the 9/11 crisis as leaders (Boin et al., 2013). Politicians are thought to use crises for two main purposes—to pass policy and/or for political leverage (Coombs, 2019).

An ethic of care

Simola (2005) credits Gilligan's (1982) work on moral reasoning in women as the catalyst for much of the scholarly work into an ethic of care following a few other works in the 1980s and 1990s across disciplines on aspects of care. In this landmark research Gilligan identified care as a moral alternative to justice, which was found in an earlier study by Kohlberg for which the subjects were all male. Gillian's study included both sexes, and she found that the moral decision making process for women and girls was often different from that of boys and men (Gilligan, 1982; Simola, 2003, 2005). Care was characterized not by traditional moral values such as individual rights, impartiality, and fairness, such as the approach taken by Kohlberg, but instead "it was characterized by concern with maintaining and enhancing relationships, as well as an

emphasis on understanding and responding to the feelings and needs of others in their particular contexts" (Simola, 2005, p. 343). In terms of the moral reasoning of men and women, Noddings (2013) also noted, "Women, in particular, seem to approach moral problems by placing themselves as nearly as possible in concrete situations and assuming personal responsibility for the choices to be made" (p. 8). In fact, the author noted that "an ethic built on caring is, […] characteristically and essentially feminine" (p. 8).

Applied Model of Care Consideration

Fraustino and Kennedy (2018) suggested the Applied Model of Care Consideration (AMCC) as an alternative approach to crisis communication, which is applicable before, during, and after a crisis. Care is not usually at the forefront of communication. However, the focus of an ethic of care includes "interdependence, mutuality, and reciprocity," which are embodied in public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2013, p. 40). For Fraustino and Kennedy, the humanity of persons needs to be taken into consideration, and therefore an ethic of care should not be limited to the private sphere but also should permeate the public sphere. They suggest that "organizations should approach an ethic of care centered on the vulnerability of the potentially affected populations, treating them as though an intimate relationship exists" (p. 25).

Using feminist theory, the model suggests that organizational communication should evolve from genuine care considerations such as respecting relationships, assessing interdependence among relationships, determining vulnerability and treating people with care, and understanding capabilities for reciprocity across four landscapes relevant to public relations practitioners—the physical (the material realities that publics face—access to resources), cultural (respect for cultural differences can inform more effective and ethical communication), political/economic (how political and economic factors contribute to recipients' access to, responses to, and processing of messages) and human (situational and contextual sensitivities in tailored communication efforts). Care within the feminist context is not the masculine normative and rationalistic ethics but is care-based ethics that demonstrates moral maturity, which could be manifested as verbal and nonverbal (Fraustino & Kennedy, 2018; Gilligan, 1982). In the political public relations context, care might be associated with women politicians because studies have shown that men receive more issue related coverage, while coverage of women politicians pays more attention to their personality traits (Htun & Piscopo, 2014). The foregoing therefore gives rise to the following research question:

RQ1: How were the four AMCC landscapes associated with Ardern in government communication, the media, and public discourse?

Agenda building

Many studies have been devoted to examining political public relations and its effectiveness through the lens of agenda setting and agenda building with a consensus that one of the major goals of political public relations efforts is to communicate and shape the salience of certain objects or certain aspects of an object in news coverage, public opinion, and policymaking (Kiousis et al., 2016; Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2014; McCombs et al., 2014). Agenda setting influences public opinion as an unintended outcome of news production, while agenda building is a deliberate attempt by public relations actors to transmit issue salience using information subsidies to audiences (Kiousis et al., 2015; Ragas & Kiousis, 2010). It is widely accepted that people get information and salience of issues and objects from the news media. The ability to tap into media's influence is important to political actors, and therefore agenda building as a practice is viewed as a critical activity to political success.

The strategic and purposeful nature of agenda building highlights the role of public relations in the social process of salience formation around issues in the media and public agendas while providing an empirically viable structure with which the effectiveness of political public relations is best understood (Lan et al., 2020; Schweickart et al., 2016; Sweetser & Brown, 2008; Tedesco, 2011). Information subsidies as important manifestations of public relations' agenda-building efforts are an ideal medium for measuring how messages are strategically constructed and how priorities are communicated to influence media content and, in turn, public opinion (Grimmer, 2010; Kiousis et al., 2016). To the extent that the agenda of source information subsidies aligns with that of the news media and/or public opinion, the agenda-building effects of public relations efforts occur.

There are three levels of agenda building identified in the literature. The first level deals with the transfer of salience from issues, objects, and stakeholders to media content (Kim et al., 2011; Kiousis et al., 2016), the second level addresses the attributes assigned to issues and objects (Golan & Wanta, 2001), and the third level is concerned with the network relationships of issues and attributes and how they intersect to influence public opinion (Guo, 2012; Guo et al., 2012).

Agenda-building scholars have predominantly been occupied with examining agenda building in an election context (Kiousis, 2004; Kiousis et al., 2015; Kiousis et al., 2009) or in the context of a government's ability to influence the attributes of foreign news coverage (Albishri et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2017). To apply agenda-building theory to political crisis communication, more research is needed. In 2008, Sweetser and Brown (2008) researched a crisis from an agenda-building perspective. However, that study's focus was the U.S. military's success in influencing the media agenda during the Israel-Lebanon crisis, which was not directly related to a domestic crisis for which the media were direct stakeholders. Although agenda-building scholars have shown interest in agenda building's influence in different political contexts, this study seeks to add to the literature by examining its role during a domestic terrorist-driven crisis, which leads to the following hypotheses:

H1: The salience of a) stakeholders and b) issues in information subsidies from the office of the New Zealand Prime Minister and the New Zealand government will be positively related to their salience in the news articles published about the terrorist attack.

H2: The salience of a) stakeholders and b) issues in information subsidies from the office of the New Zealand Prime Minister and the New Zealand government will be positively related to their salience in the public discourse on Twitter regarding the terrorist attack.

Second-level agenda building

The second level of agenda-building looks at the salience of attributes assigned to objects (Kiousis et al., 2006). Kiousis et al. (2016) identified two main types of attributes: substantive and affective. Substantive attributes refer to "the cognitive dimension of attribute salience based on reasoning," while affective attributes are concerned with "the valence dimension of salience that is based on emotion" (pp. 4-5). Issue frames are typical examples of the substantive attribute dimension used in prior agenda-building studies, as framing involves the process of promoting certain aspects of issues more than other aspects in messages (Entman, 1993; McCombs, 1997). According to Weaver et al. (2004), "Journalists can present only a few aspects of any object in the news," which they termed "agendas of attributes," which can be considerably salient (p. 259). Affective attributes, on the other hand, are often operationalized as the tone of messages—the positive, negative, or neutral portrayal of the objects (Kiousis et al., 2016). This study will measure the influence of the attributes ascribed to objects and issues by the New Zealand government, which gives rise to the following hypotheses:

H3: The framing of the issues in the public relations messages from Ardern and the New Zealand government will be positively related to the salience of those frames in a) the media coverage and b) public tweets about the Christchurch massacre.

H4: The tone toward the issues in the public relations messages from Ardern and the New Zealand government will be positively related to the salience of similar tone toward those issues in a) the media coverage and b) public tweets about the Christchurch massacre.

Network agenda building

The first and second levels of agenda building focus on salience transfer of individual objects and attributes, while the third level, or the network agenda, focuses on the bundling of issues and/or attributes and their subsequent packaged transfer to the media agenda that contribute to the perception of linkages among different objects or attributes (Guo & McCombs, 2011; Vargo & Guo, 2017). Research into network agenda building is relatively limited with little qualitative data (e.g., Albishri et al., 2019; Kiousis et al., 2015; Neil et al., 2016; Yang & Saffer, 2018;

Zhang et al., 2017). Several of these studies found supporting evidence for the cooccurrence of attributes in information subsidies and the news coverage. This study adds to this new body of research by examining the third level of agenda building in a crisis context and therefore proffers the following hypothesis:

H5: The salience of stakeholders' network cooccurrences in the public relations messages of Ardern and the New Zealand government's messages will be positively related to their salience in a) media coverage and b) public discourse regarding the Christchurch massacre.

The research site

On Friday, March 15, 2019, white supremacist hatred shattered Christchurch's generally peaceful existence and focused the world's spotlight on that country. Fifty-one lives were lost, and another 50 persons were wounded when a 28-year-old Australian man using military-style weapons opened gunfire on two mosques where persons from the Muslim community were worshiping. Reacting to the tragedy, Ardern labeled it a terrorist act resulting in the national security threat level being raised from low to high for the first time in that country's history (Ardern, 2019). Ardern was portrayed as a self-identified feminist, and media reports commended her for showing calmness, compassion, and empathy (Newsome, 2019; Rizvi, 2019). President George W. Bush, for example, in the wake of 9/11 "wanted to find out who did this and kick their ass," while Ardern on the other hand "focused her energies on the victims, their loved ones, and a nation that needs to heal" (Rizvi, 2019, paras. 3-4).

Method

As in previous agenda-building studies (e.g., Albishri et al., 2019; Kiousis et al., 2016), this study used content analysis to test the hypotheses regarding the transfer of salience of objects and attributes from Ardern's information subsidies to news media content and public discourse in the context of the Christchurch mosques shootings. Communications (media releases, speeches, and transcripts) of Ardern and the New Zealand government were collected and served as units of analysis, along with news stories and public tweets mentioning the massacre, from the day it occurred on March 15, 2019, until April 30, 2019, when communications about the incident petered out.

Sample

Sample data for this study covered the six weeks following the incident. Howell and Miller (2006) suggested that crises have a life cycle in the same vein as the product lifestyle in marketing. At all five stages in the crisis life cycle (prodromal or signal detection, preparation or probing, acute or containment, chronic or learning, and resolution or recovery), a mass media solution is suggested to mitigate fallout. The period covered addresses these stages and encompasses the bulk of the news coverage about the incident.

The media content about the incident was obtained from six national media outlets in Australia and New Zealand and the Associated Press using the search terms: Christchurch massacre, Jacinda Ardern, Muslims, Mosque, New Zealand, Gun Man, and terrorism. A total of 1,674 articles were retrieved from the News Bank database. However, because of redundancy in the articles, only some of the Australian and New Zealand newspapers (N = 181) and the Associated Press ($N = 44$) were coded. The Associated Press stories were used because of its intermediary agenda-setting function for international news selection (Golan, 2006). Communications from Ardern taken from the official government website Beehive.gov.nz were statements made in news releases ($N = 19$) and speeches ($N = 1$). To analyze public opinion, online tweets were retrieved using hashtags. The unit of analysis for public opinion was a single tweet posted by users. Data were retrieved from the hashtags using a crawling and open source program that was written in Python by several developers (Henrique, 2017). The scraping of Twitter data resulted in a large number of tweets ($N = 39,798$), so a random sample of 1,500 tweets was used from #ChristchurchMosqueAttack.

Measures

Object salience

A total of 16 stakeholders and 10 issues was selected for content analysis. The stakeholders were determined based on an initial reading of 10 percent of the sample containing communications from Ardern and news stories. The stakeholders were (1) Ardern, (2) Prime Minister Scott Morrison, (3) Mosques Victims, (4) the gunman, (5) ethnic and religious groups, (6) immigrants and refugees, (7) terrorists and terrorist groups, (9) parliamentarians and senators, (9) government departments and agencies/police force, (10) courts, judges, and attorneys, (11) news media, (12) New Zealanders/Kiwis, (13) Islamic States/Leaders of Islamic States (14), Australians/Aussies (15), international organizations (16), community organizations (17), and foreign countries and leaders other than of Islamic states. Each stakeholder was coded as present (1) or absent (0) based on the mention of the stakeholder in the individual government message, news article, or tweet.

The eight issues chosen for the analysis were based on the reading of the sample previously described. The issues examined in this study were: (1) threat to national security, (2) legislation,

(3) gun control, (4) immigration, (5) race relations, (6) human interest, (7) terrorism, (8) values and morals, and (9) internet open access. Each issue was coded as present (1) or absent (0) with the help of a list of keywords developed for each issue. For example, the issue immigration was recorded as present when "migrants," "immigration," or "refugees" were mentioned. For the issue race relations, the keywords used were "race," "racism," "Islamophobia," and "white supremacist."

Object salience was then determined by an aggregate measure of presence of each of the stakeholders and the issues in the same agenda (the agenda of Ardern, the news media, or public discussion).

Attribute salience

Five issue frames were chosen as substantive attributes for the analysis based both on the initial reading of the small portion of the sample and on a short list of the so-called generic frames identified in previous studies (Baran & Davis, 2015; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). They were (1) unity, (2) responsibility, (3) conflict, (4) resolution, and (5) tragedy. These frames assess whether a message is framing an issue in terms of solidarity, responsibility attribution, conflict, solution or treatment recommendation, or human tragedy. For example, a unity issue frame is reflected in the following messages: "when groups come together," "political agreement," or "we must act." The tragedy frame is present if any victims or expressions such as "innocent worshipers" were mentioned. Each frame was coded as present (1) or absent (0).

Following Kiousis et al. (2016), the affective attributes were measured with regard to the overall tone displayed specifically toward each issue mentioned in the analyzed messages. The tone was coded as (1) positive, (2) neutral, or (3) negative.

Attribute salience was determined by an aggregate measure of presence of each of the issue frames or tone category in the same agenda (the agenda of Ardern, the news media, or public discussion).

AMCC landscapes

We also measured how the four AMCC landscapes were associated with Ardern by assessing each of the landscapes' presence (where 1 = present, and 0 = absent) in the messages, articles, or tweets that mention Ardern. The presence of the four landscapes was judged with the help of predetermined keywords and expressions. For example, cultural landscape was present if the message, article, or tweet mentioned Ardern wearing the hijab, meeting with the Muslim community, attributing the attack as targeted to one particularly community or group, or reaching out to the Muslim community. Political landscape was present when the message, article, or tweet mentioned Ardern pushing changes to gun laws, addressing parliament in pushing the passage of gun reforms, seeking to end use of social media for acts of terrorism, or moving the national terrorism threat level up.

Message type

The communications from Ardern and media stories as well as the public tweets were further categorized as follows: (1) media releases, (2) transcripts, (3) speeches, (4) news stories, (5) editorials, and (6) opinions.

Intercoder reliability

Coding was equally distributed among the three coders. Intercoder reliability was assessed using Krippendorff's alpha. In all, 10% of the sample was used in coder training, and 20% was used in calculating Krippendorff's alpha. After four rounds of coding, coders were able to reach a satisfactory agreement for all variables: stakeholders (0.83), issues (0.76), frames (0.71), tone (0.73), and AMCC (0.79).

Data analysis

To analyze how the AMCC was applied in the crisis communication, the coders were asked to identify which of the four landscapes was linked with Ardern each time she was mentioned. Then, the frequencies of landscapes were calculated for each type of communication to identify how frequently each landscape was associated with the Prime Minister. Due to the violation of Chi-Square assumptions of cells count as shown in Figure 1, the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test was used to scrutinize whether there were differences between sources of messages regarding the relative proportion of associating the Prime Minister with the four landscapes. The Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test has been used as an extension to the Fisher's exact test to deal with contingency tables that are larger than 2 X 2 (de Waal, 2015).

    To analyze the first and second levels of agenda building, the frequencies of mentions regarding issues, stakeholders, frames, and tone were calculated for the New Zealand government messages, media, and public tweets. The lists of frequencies then were correlated using Spearman's rank-order correlation to test each hypothesis. The analysis for the third level of agenda building (*H5*) was conducted using the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) to correlate the networks of stakeholders in the New Zealand government messages with their networks in media and public tweets. All the analyses were conducted using different R packages.

Results

AMCC

RQ1 asked how the four AMCC landscapes were associated with Ardern in government communication, media, and public discourse. As shown in Figure 1, the New Zealand government messages had equally linked Ardern with the political (38.9%) and human (38.9%) landscapes. The same type of messages associated Ardern with the physical landscape in 22% of the total messages, and she was never associated with the cultural landscape in the New Zealand government messages. A similar pattern is also notable in the case of media coverage and public tweets as the political landscape was predominantly associated with Ardern compared to the other landscapes (47.9% in media coverage and 53.3% in public tweets). The human landscape was associated with Ardern in 42% and 33% of her total mentions in media coverage and public tweets, respectively. Out of her total mentions, Ardern was linked to the cultural landscape 9.2% of the time in media coverage, and 11.7% of the time in public tweets. She has seldomly been associated with the physical landscape in both media (0.8%) and public discourse on Twitter (1.7%).

Due to the size of the contingency table, and having less than 5 counts in some cells, the Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test was used to determine whether there was significant difference between the New Zealand government's messages and news media coverage regarding associating the four AMCC landscapes with Ardern. The result shows that there was significant difference between the two types of messages regarding the relative proportion of AMCC landscapes (Fisher-Freeman-Halton exact test = 13.203, $p < .05$). The same test also was used to determine the difference between the New Zealand government messages and the public tweets about the crisis in terms of how both sources associate the four AMCC landscapes with Ardern. The analysis revealed a similar result to the first comparison: There was a significant association between the source of messages (New Zealand government vs. public tweets) and the relative proportion of which AMCC landscape was associated with Ardern (Fisher- Freeman-Halton exact test = 9.601, $p < .05$). Although the associations were significant in both cases, they provide evidence against the agenda-building power of the New Zealand government when it comes to influencing news media and the public regarding the proportional association of Ardern with the four AMCC landscapes. This logic of interpreting tests of association (e.g., Chi-Square, Fisher's exact test) has been applied in previous agenda-setting and agenda-building studies (Golan & Wanta, 2001; Kiousis et al., 2013; Lan et al., 2020).

Figure 1

The Distribution of AMCC Landscapes Across the Sources
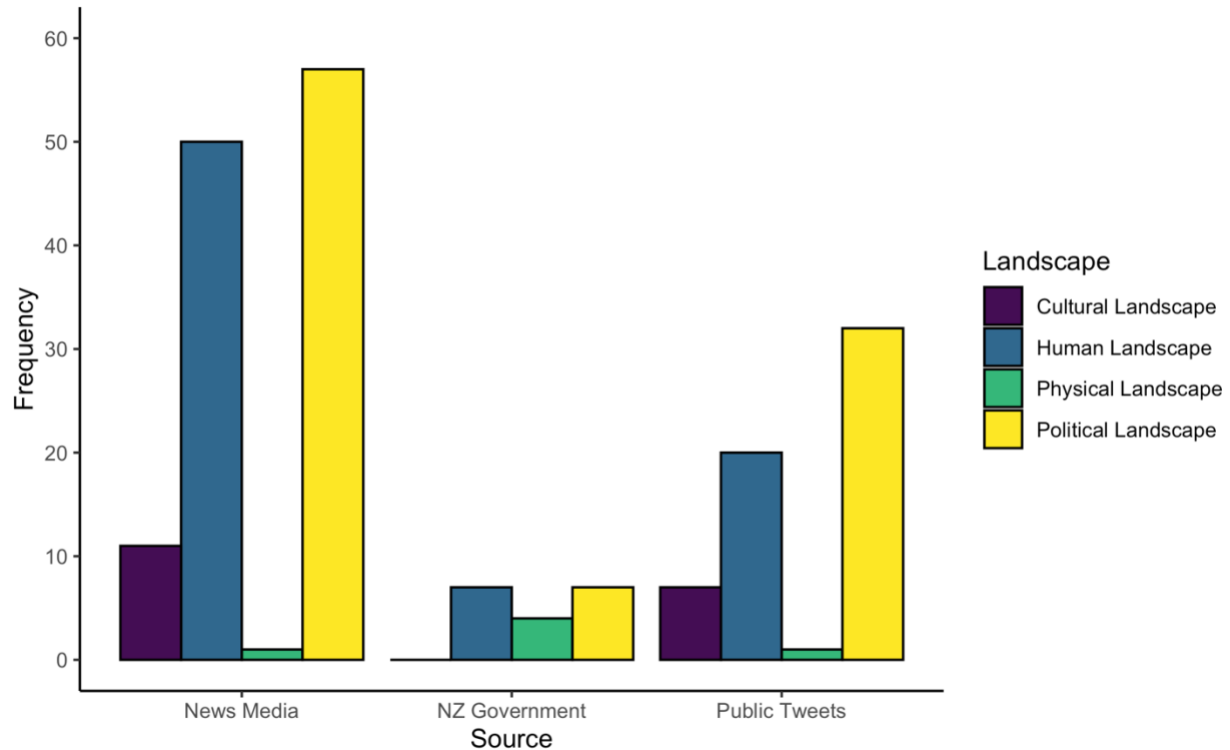
Object salience

H1 predicted that the salience of a) stakeholders and b) issues in information subsidies from the office of the New Zealand Prime Minister and the New Zealand government will be positively related to their salience in the news articles published about the terrorist attack. The data offered support for *H1* for both stakeholders ($r = .573$, $p < .05$) and issues ($r = .632$, $p < .05$).

Relative to the total mentions of issues and stakeholders in the New Zealand government communication and the Prime Minister messages, New Zealand (15%), Ardern (14%), and Racial/Religious Groups (12%) were the most salient stakeholders, whereas Terrorism (28%), Human Interest (24%), and Security (12%) were on the top list of issues in government agendas. The news coverage of the Christchurch attack, however, put more emphasis on New Zealand (14%), Christchurch Mosque Victims (12%), and Racial/Religious Groups (10%). In terms of issues, the media coverage prioritized the same list of issues as the New Zealand government with slightly different emphasis and order (Security: 24%; Terrorism: 20%; Human Interest: 19%).

H2 stated that the salience of a) stakeholders and b) issues in information subsidies from the office of the New Zealand Prime Minister and the New Zealand government will be positively

related to their salience in the public discourse on Twitter regarding the terrorist attack. The correlations between the strategic messages by New Zealand's government and the public discourse on Twitter regarding the Christchurch attack were also significant for both stakeholders ($r = .659, p < .01$) and issues ($r = .717, p < .05$). *H2* thus was supported.

The public discussion of the Christchurch attack emphasized New Zealand (35%), Racial/Religious Groups (18%), and Christchurch Mosque Victims (9%) among the other stakeholders. In the same vein, Terrorism (32%), Human Interest (24%), and Politics (10%) were on the top list of issues mentioned in public tweets regarding the Christchurch attack.

Attribute salience

This part of the results focuses on the transfer of issues attributes from the New Zealand government's agendas to news media and public discourse on Twitter about the Christchurch attack. *H3* argued that the framing of the issues in the public relations messages from Ardern and the New Zealand government will be positively related to the salience of those frames in a) the media coverage and b) public tweets about the Christchurch massacre. Across all the types of messages, the issue of terrorism was mostly framed as "Responsibility Attribution" to either the perpetrator or far-right groups. Although the issue of human interest was predominantly framed as a tragedy in the government communication and the news coverage of the attack, it was mostly discussed by the public as an opportunity for unity and tolerance among different social and religious groups. The issue of politics was discussed from a conflict perspective in both media and public discourse; however, the same issue was mostly mentioned from a resolution perspective in the New Zealand government messages. Overall, the correlation between government messages on one hand and the news coverage and public discourse on the other hand concerning the transfer of issues attribute saliency was significant (news coverage: $r = .418, p < .001$; public discourse: $r = .353, p < .01$) (See Figure 1). Thus, *H3* was supported.

H4 suggested that the tone toward the issues in the public relations messages from Ardern and the New Zealand government will be positively related to the salience of similar tone toward those issues in a) the media coverage and b) public tweets about the Christchurch massacre. This hypothesis was only supported in the case of the correlation regarding tone saliency between government messages and the public discourse on Twitter (*H4b*; $r = .467, p < .01$). *H4a* was not supported. Out of the 11 issues discussed in the government messages, 5 were predominantly neutral, while 3 were mostly had a positive tone, and 3 were mostly discussed in a negative tone. Media, on the other hand, had 7 issues that were predominantly discussed in a negative tone, compared to 2 mostly neutral issues and 2 that were positive. Finally, a negative tone in public tweets was salient in 7 out of 11 issues, while a neutral tone was salient in 3 issues, and a positive tone was salient in 1 issue out of the 11 issues.

Network salience

As mentioned in the literature, the third level of agenda building examines how the linkages among issues or stakeholders transfer from one source to another. *H5* proposed that the salience of stakeholders' network cooccurrences in the public relations messages of Ardern and the New Zealand government's messages will be positively related to their salience in a) media coverage and b) public discourse regarding the Christchurch massacre. Three network matrices were created in Excel by calculating how frequently one stakeholder is mentioned with another stakeholder in the New Zealand government messages, media coverage, and public discourse on Twitter. The government matrix was correlated with media and public tweets matrices using the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) test through an R package. The results showed that the cooccurrences of stakeholders in the government messages were significantly correlated with their cooccurrences in the news coverage (*QAP* = .593, *p* < 001) and the public discourse on Twitter (*QAP* = .507, *p* < 001). Therefore, *H5* was supported.

Discussion

This study empirically investigated the effectiveness of the crisis communication by Ardern and her administration following the Christchurch mosques shootings to influence media and public agendas. The study used content analysis to examine the relationships between the government's communication to the news media coverage of the crisis and public discussions of the incident. The results revealed solid support for all three levels of agenda-building linkages (i.e., object salience, attribute salience, and network associations among objects or attributes) of Ardern's crisis communication to news content and to public discussion. The results of this study underscore the value in further extending the political public relations and agenda-building model (Kiousis et al., 2016; Tedesco, 2011) to a political crisis communication context.

Specifically, the study found that the issues raised in the government's correspondence were those prioritized in the media. One such issue was the Prime Minister's naming the incident a terrorist attack and moving the country's terrorist threat level to high for the first time in that country's history. The perpetrator, an Australian national, did not fit the traditional description of people the West typically portrays as terrorists, but by naming the gunman as such and raising the threat level, the Prime Minister gave salience to these objects and issues and set the stage for the media to follow, demonstrating the power of political communication and its agenda-building influence to give labels and priority to events.

The success of Ardern to attribute responsibility for the loss of lives to the use of automatic weapons was instrumental in helping with the speedy passing of new gun laws, which demonstrates the strategic nature of agenda building and political public relations. All these laws were proposed and passed by April 11, which supports the political crisis communication

literature argument that politicians use crisis events to pass laws that would be difficult during normal times and to support their mission and goals.

The government was not only successful in leading the issues but also in directing the tone of public opinion supporting Hart's (1993) argument of crises having both a perceptual and affective category. This white supremacist terror attack on the Muslim community could have quickly escalated into a race war. Ardern's tone, however, engendered togetherness and brotherly/sisterly love among the different races of people living in New Zealand, which gives credence to Fraustino and Kennedy's (2018) call for more investigation into a feminist approach to crises as Ardern's communication did not take the masculine approach of a call for justice, but rather was more in line with care and called for building closer ties within the community (Gilligan, 1982; Simola, 2003, 2005). Ardern appeared to have thrived during the crisis as politicians can do (Coombs, 2019). In terms of crisis types, it was symbolic of how unity could evolve from tragedy through meaning making. In the wake of the Christchurch attack, Ardern made meaning and managed emotions by incorporating care in her symbolic crisis response— manifested by, for example, hugging and speaking at length to and about the people in the Muslim community who had been targeted in the attack (Salomonsen & Hart, 2020). In terms of network agenda building, Ardern's messages were mostly framed as being sympathetic toward the victims, which could lead to the perception that she was a compassionate leader that embraced diversity.

The findings also imply that the incorporation of the ethic of care in crisis communication might have played a role in facilitating the transfer of salience. The government communication emphasized the humane and political aspects of the care in leadership, while both the media and the public via Twitter perceived the two aspects as most prominent. In the analysis, the humane aspect was manifested by the mentioning of Ardern and her administration's empathy and support to victims. The political aspect was recorded when there was a condemnation of extremist and terrorist acts and a call for changes to laws, for example.

Whereas about one-fifth of the communications by Ardern and her administration contained the physical aspect (manifested by providing material support), very few of the media and public messages paid attention to this aspect when discussing the government's leadership. Although both the media and the public placed a moderate amount of attention on the cultural aspect of the care in leadership, the government did not emphasize this aspect in its communications. This may be due to the sensitivity of the cultural aspect, which was manifested by gestures like meeting with the Muslim community and wearing the hijab, and this sensitivity seems to demonstrate that the public is most interested in how politicians make them feel, rather than the actions that they take since the cultural was played out in the nonverbal actions of the Prime Minister. Her approach, therefore, appears to give credence to the application of a caring feminist approach to a political crisis, a domain that has been dominated by male leaders.

Theoretical and practical implications

The question of how a feminist approach to crises influences public opinion remains understudied. However, this study adds five main findings to the literature. Following are the theoretical and practical implications.

First, Ardern acted with a feminist ethic of care, which answers the research question and supports Fraustino and Kennedy's (2018) position that care can be exhibited beyond interpersonal relationships and outside the private domain. This finding gives credence to further research on differences between male and female approaches to political leadership especially during a crisis. Care was found to be exhibited in at least three landscapes in the government communication—the human, physical, and political, suggesting the feasibility of engaging with care at the level of wider society and in the public sphere. Although the social and political construction of care as a gendered concept has received much attention across the social sciences (Milligan & Wiles, 2010), it is important to recognize the need and benefits of extending the ethics of care to the political communication domain, particularly given that the number of women leaders around the world, although still a small group, has grown (Geiger & Kent, 2017).

Second, the study provides at least some empirical evidence that an ethical approach to crisis communication could bring about an alignment of media and public agendas to the political leader. The public relations literature suggests the dominance of the two-way symmetrical model as an ethical approach to public relations (Bowen & Gallicano, 2013; Grunig & Grunig, 1992). The ethics of care might serve as a useful alternative approach to crisis communication that takes consideration of a more complex social and political-economic context.

Third, the media interprets actions and frames political actors based on these actions, which would account for care in the cultural landscape being found in media coverage and public tweets. The significance of this finding is that the nonverbal actions of politicians become just as important during crises as the verbal. For women leaders, nonverbal actions might be even more critical as their choice of clothing, the events they attend, and the type of help they give become political statements that are interpreted by the media. In this instance, these acts were interpreted as care.

The fourth finding adds to the complexity of salience transference at the second level of agenda building. Although there was a strong transference of issues, the transference of tone was less prevalent. From a practical standpoint, one might reason that in this type of crisis, the public becomes dependent on the government for information and instruction, and therefore the government frames would be salient. However, what was also evident from a practical standpoint is that, in this type of crisis the public is also important since the terrorist attack was based on racial hate, and public opinion demonstrated that the public did not endorse the action. Therefore, although the predominant human interest frame from the government was that of tragedy and New Zealand's "darkest days" (Wockner, 2019, para. 7), this same frame was discussed by the public as an opportunity for unity and tolerance, which suggests that practitioners should use unity frames for crises like this one.

Finally, like other network agenda-building studies, this research found that the cooccurrences of stakeholders in the government messages were significantly correlated with their cooccurrences in the news coverage (Guo & McCombs, 2011; Vargo & Guo, 2017). Further research in this area is needed to identify the different influences on public opinion that these relationships might have. For the political public relations practitioner, these findings make it more critical to be strategic in selecting the stakeholders and issues with which to associate since the media and public have been found to make meaning from everything that is done during a crisis.

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