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THE DISASTER PRESS CONFERENCE: FORM AND FUNCTION

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ABSTRACT

This study uses a structural functional perspective in examining the form and function of a presidential disaster press conference on May 27, 2010 about the Deepwater BP Oil Spill. Clayman and Heritage (2002) proposed a framework to examine the questions and responses in a press conference while Fisher (1991) offered a method to study media function. These were both applied to the disaster press conference. Findings were used to develop recommendations for public officials and PIOs in working with the media. Despite the fact that this case suggests an adversarial relationship between public officials and the media, public officials need to focus on public information needs in meeting with the press. In addition to questions about the reasons and impact of the disaster, public officials need to be prepared to respond to questions about accountability and responsibility for disasters.

INTRODUCTION

Officials in public safety and emergency management organizations are responsible for ensuring that the affected public receives accurate and timely information during an emergency. Armed with good information, people are better able to make good decisions and, by doing so, contribute to the overall response goal of saving lives and protecting property. One of the primary ways for emergency management officials to provide this vital information to the public is through the media. One of the tools they use is the press conference (FEMA, 2009). However, many public officials when they hear the words, “press conference,” feel apprehensive.

The pen-ultimate press conference is when the press meets the president, which Larry Speakes compared to a “Roman Circus” (Mountains Out of Washington Molehills, 1985). No wonder ordinary executives, including those at the city level or county level, find the press conference intimidating. This paper examines the literature related to press conferences in public service, looking at the role of the press conference in emergencies, and making recommendations to emergency management officials for using it more effectively. Because the presidential press conference is the most studied press conference, it is appropriate that it be examined in the context of disasters and lessons learned applied to public officials at all levels. This study uses a structural functional perspective in examining the form and function of disaster press conferences.

The press conference is an opportunity for public officials to show the media and the public that they are “organized, effective, and responsible ... in the face of disaster” (Folkerts, 1999). Regularly scheduled press conferences through the course of the crisis can keep the press up-to-date on developments and provide them with vital information to pass along, thus allaying public concerns and preparing them to deal with the emergency situation. In catastrophes, emergency personnel and health facilities will not be able to meet the needs of everyone affected. While first responders may not be able to reach all members of the public, the media’s outreach will provide information to protect them and their property.

A growing trend exists in English-speaking countries towards adversarial questioning in news interviews. Journalists formulate their questions in an increasingly challenging or ‘hostile’

manner which was rarely seen decades ago. This is particularly true in broadcast interviews with politicians or public figures. Burriss (1989) explored the “changing relationship between the press and Presidents by looking at the questions reporters ask and the answers Presidents give to those questions” (468). Over the period of time studied from 1963 (President Johnson) to 1988 (President Reagan), the length of questions and statements made by reporters, and the length of presidential responses increased significantly. While Burriss couldn’t give the reasons for the changes, he surmised, partly because of the dishonesty of the Nixon presidency, that reporters may have become less trusting of the presidency and more aggressive in their questioning. Reporters are more arrogant and combative, according to one viewpoint. The world has also become more complex. Reporters tend to give longer statements with their questions and the length of presidential responses is much longer.

Officials’ responses have also changed with the increased adversarialness of reporters’ questions. Based on an analysis of 33 televised British political interviews, Bull (1994) developed a set of guidelines for differentiating between questions, replies, and non-replies. Responses to questions in political interviews are not simply dichotomized into replies and non-replies, but examined on a continuum. Politicians choose what question to answer and whether or not to answer it fully or only partially. Using a different approach, Harris (1991) arrived at a similar conclusion based on the analysis of three dimensions of answering, i.e. direct, indirect and challenges, from officials. She concluded that politicians tend to give evasive answers in front of the media, based on her finding that the number of direct answers given by politicians (barely over 39%) were considerably lower than any other groups of interviewees (averaging over 67%). In sum, studies on question-answer sequences in broadcast interviews (including press conferences) seem to suggest that interviewers are more likely to use more aggressive questions, and politicians are more likely to give evasive answers than other groups of respondents.

Ekström (2009) showed how President George W. Bush used a number of techniques to control reporters in press conferences. He interrupted to control who would be able to ask questions, disagreed and rejected criticism, demonstrated certainty and conviction, and made jokes with the journalists. Sequences of jokes and laughter strengthened the interactive power of the President, created affiliations, and questioned the expected neutrality of journalists.

FORM IN PRESS CONFERENCES

Form is synonymous with structure. Structure is defined as a pattern or observable uniformity in terms of the action or operation taking place. In the social sciences, the focus of analysis has been on the structure of societies and other social systems or the structures (patterns) of actions in general. Patterns become institutionalized as normative patterns develop. When they become institutionalized conformity is expected, and failure to conform is sanctioned or met with indignation. The structure becomes a requisite of the system (Fisher, 2010).

Ostman, Babcock, and Fallert (1981) used the form of questions to examine President John F. Kennedy’s use of the press conference. He held more press conferences on average than other presidents and he listened carefully to the questions reporters asked. While his answers were not always detailed, he “demonstrated time and again that he had listened, often by using an exact word or phrase which the reporter had voiced in the question” (580). Ostman, Babcock, and Fallert (1981) hypothesized that “good” questions from reporters would elicit “good” answers from the president. As the basis for analysis, they used 16 suggestions for good

“interview” questions derived from a review of research. Reporters who asked questions in keeping with the textbook suggestions generally received the answers they desired. They got “good” answers when they asked questions “without words with double meanings, where time, place and context were specified, where all alternatives were specified, where the unfamiliar was explained, where opinions and self-perceptions were expressed when wanted, where immediate experience was referred to, where emotionally-charged words were not used, and where the President stuck to the topic and subjects broached” (580).

The findings from Ostman, Babcock, and Fallert (1981) provide public officials a set of guidelines to follow when anticipating questions and when providing statements or answers to questions. Officials should be clear about time, place and context of events, factual and explicit about details and avoid emotional or embarrassing and loaded or leading questions. Be prepared for questions asking for opinions and attitudes as well as self-perceptions. Use good grammar and avoid multi-part answers and long answers.

To measure the degree of “deference or adversarialness” of questions in media interviews, Clayman and Heritage (2002) developed a model for analysis, which they used to examine press conferences of Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan. It consisted of four basic dimensions of adversarial questioning: (a) initiative (the practice of questioning in which journalists 'set a more independent and constraining agenda' for interviewees while leaving the latter less leeway to pursue their own agendas), (b) directness (referring to the aggressiveness or hostility of journalistic questioning), (c) assertiveness (the practice of questioning in which journalists 'push for a particular response' from the interviewee) and (d) hostility (the practice of questioning which is overtly critical of interviewee's ability or questioning his or her accountability). The four dimensions are further divided into ten question design indicators, shown in Table 2. Under the initiative dimension were complex questions, question cascades (where the question is repeated several times in different words), and follow-up questions.

TABLE 1: Dimensions of Adversarial Questioning (Clayman and Heritage, 2002)

Dimensions of adversarial questioning	Question design indicators
1. Initiative – setting agenda for questioning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - question complexity - question cascades - follow-up questions
2. Directness – aggressiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - other referencing question frames - self-referencing question frames
3. Assertiveness – pushing for a particular response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - preface tilt - negatively formulated questions
4. Hostility – overtly critical or questioning accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - preface hostility - global hostility - accountability questions

Directness was marked by other referencing question frames where the reporter suggested the president was unable or unwilling to give a response, demanding a response with words like “would you” or “can you.” The opposite, indirectness, resulted in self-referencing question frames, a more polite form of questions that included words like “I was wondering” or “I would

like to ask.” Assertive questions used preface tilt (seeking a yes/no answer) or were negatively formulated, beginning with statements like “isn’t it,” “aren’t you,” or “don’t you think that.” Hostility questions used preface hostility (where hostile statements are made before the question) and global hostility (where both the preface and question as well as follow-up questions are hostile). Hostility was also shown by accountability questions, using “why did you” or “how could you.” Clayman and Heritage's study suggested increased adversarialness in journalists' treatment of U.S. Presidents Eisenhower and Reagan, based on major differences in the adversarial dimension and question design indicators in press conferences.

FUNCTION IN PRESS CONFERENCES

Functions are those activities that influence the way decisions are made and executed. Function determines the purpose or result of the action. In formal functional analysis the effects of a trait are used to explain the system rather than the trait. In other words, function is studied by looking at its impact on the system (Fisher 2010). Understanding form or structure (patterns) could possibly lead to a better comprehension of the function or purpose of the action. In 1991 Fisher examined mass media functions in covering education policy making. In his study he suggested 14 media functions in six policy stages.

TABLE 2: Media Functions in Policy Making (Fisher, 1991)

Policy stages	Media functions
1. Problem identification / articulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identification of problems - Relaying problems to public
2. Policy recommendation / aggregation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identification of groups & proposals - Identification policymaker proposals - Media suggestion of content
3. Policy decision / adoption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Setting tempo of decision making - Recommending how to vote - Informing public of content
4. Policy implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Describing administration - Alerting public to problems
5. Policy evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evaluating effectiveness - Reacting to policy
6. Issue resolution or change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Stimulating review - Proposing change or termination

Public officials use the press conference to provide information to the public so that they in turn can make decisions to protect themselves and their property. On the other hand, executives in private business use the press conference to protect the interests of their stakeholders (stockholders, employees, customers) and assure business continuity. Generally, the media use the press conference to learn what happened and why it happened.

STUDY QUESTIONS

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- What is the purpose (function) of the press conference in disaster situations?
- Do the pattern of questions (form or structure) lead to a better understanding of the purpose (function) of the press conference?
- Does an adversarial tone exist in reporter questioning during disaster press conferences?

The review of the literature suggests a number of propositions that are worth examining in the context of a study of the disaster press conference. While not all these propositions can be confirmed within the limitations of one study of one press conference, this study should provide insights into most of the propositions.

1. The public officials' purpose is to provide information to the public so they can make decisions that will protect their safety.
2. The media purpose is to find out the reasons for the disaster and the impact of the disaster.
3. Press conferences for man-made disasters will be more adversarial than press conferences for natural disasters.
4. As adversarialness increases questions and answers will become longer and more multi-faceted.
5. Understanding the patterns of questions (form) leads to greater comprehension of the purpose (function) of the press conference.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses the frameworks proposed by Clayman and Heritage (2002) (see Table 2) and Fisher (1991) (see Table 3) to examine form and function in the May 27, 2010 Presidential Press Conference about the Deepwater BP Oil Spill. Following a statement by President Obama, he invited 10 reporters to ask questions. These questions were examined using the dimensions of initiative, directness, assertiveness, and hostility and the 10 forms of questions proposed by Clayman and Heritage as well as the 14 media functions proposed by Fisher.

RESULTS

Table 3 shows the results from the analysis of the questions at the presidential press conference about the BP deepwater oil spill. Ten reporters asked 29 questions on 18 topics. The original questions averaged 95 words (ranging from 40-162 words). Four reporters asked seven follow-up questions (ranging from three to 46 words). Only two people asked one question on one topic. Twenty-two of the questions (76 percent) focused on the main topic of the oil spill. Seven of the questions dealt with four topics different from the main topic: one about the war in Afghanistan, one about immigration, one proposing an embargo of Arizona, and a fourth about ethics in an appointment.

TABLE 3. Results from Analysis of Press Conference Questions

Questions	Number	Average	Range
Original question	10 reporters	95 words average	40-162 words
Follow-up	4 reporters, 7 questions	14 words average	3-46 words
Total questions	29 questions	Average 2.9 questions per reporter	1-7 questions *
Topics	18 topics	Average of 1.8 topics per reporter Median 2	1-3 topics

* 2 people asked 1 question each on 1 topic

DISCUSSION

The following comments relate to form.

- Most questions were multi-part questions with preliminary statements, suggesting a high level of question complexity, showing high reporter initiative.
- Cascading questions (multiple questions on the same topic) were used three times.
- Reporters showed little global hostility, but asked accountability questions 12 times.
- Only once did a reporter suggest the president was unwilling to answer a question (other referencing question frames). Only once was an indirect question asked.
- Reporters used preface tilting twice (asking for yes-no responses) and used negatively formulated questions 4 times.

The following comments refer to reporter functions suggested by the questions they asked.

- Most reporter questions functioned at the policy implementation stage (stage 4), and at the issue change stage (stage 6, stimulating review).
- Reporters described and asked questions that pointed out problems in policy implementation. These alerted the public to these particular problems in administration.
- While reporters repeatedly identified problems (stage 1), only once did a reporter suggestion policy action (stage 2) and only once did a reporter suggest a position the president should take on an issue (stage 3).

CONCLUSIONS

The study was able to provide responses to the three questions posed in its problem statement.

- *What is the purpose (function) of the press conference in disaster situations?* The questions clearly indicated that the press performed functions in asking the questions. Reporters asked questions that pointed out problems in policy implementation and alerted the public to problems in administration. While reporters repeatedly identified problems, only once was a policy proposal suggested.

- *Do the pattern of questions (form or structure) lead to a better understanding of the purpose (function) of the press conference?* The form of questions suggest functions of the press in the news conference. For example, accountability questions pointed out problems in the administration of the policy.
- *Does an adversarial tone exist in reporter questioning during disaster press conferences?* In this particular press conference all but possibly one reporter adopted an adversarial tone. Even then, while the question was in an indirect form, it suggested the need for administration accountability.

The following reports on whether the proposed propositions were supported or not:

1. *The public officials' purpose is to provide information to the public so they can make decisions that will protect their safety.* In this case the President did not provide information to protect property or improve quality of life in the area of the oil spill. He mainly defended administration actions in regards to the cleanup of the spill and shifted blame to BP.
2. *The media purpose is to find out the reasons for the disaster and the impact of the disaster.* Clearly the purpose of the media was to point to administration problems in the oil spill clean-up and to hold the administration accountable. Since this press conference was held many weeks into the clean-up, questions about why and what were already answered.
3. *Press conferences for man-made disasters will be more adversarial than press conferences for natural disasters.* While this press conference was highly adversarial, the study did not provide information that would allow conclusions about whether it was more so than press conferences for natural disasters.
4. *As adversarialness increases questions and answers will become longer and more multi-faceted.* No comparison data is available to determine if this is true or not.
5. *Understanding the patterns of questions (form) leads to greater comprehension of the purpose (function) of the press conference.* As reported earlier, the form of questions suggests functions of the media. It would follow this would lead to a greater understanding of the purpose of the press conference. The media clearly felt a need to hold the administration accountable, while the President's purpose was mainly to show how the administration was doing all that it could in the situation.

Further study is needed to determine if this is typical of disaster press conferences at the presidential level or whether this was isolated to the BP deepwater spill. Comparisons of disaster press conferences at other levels (state and local) are needed to determine patterns and distinguish between man-made and natural disasters. Analysis and review of press conferences appears to have potential as a tool in preparing public officials for disaster press conferences.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

Public officials and PIOs need to understand clearly their role in informing and keeping the public safe in disaster situations and how the media can assist in achieving these goals. However, they also need to understand the other motivations the media have for reporting emergencies. The media report disasters because they make "good" news stories and draw in huge audiences. In other words, disasters are news worthy and receive a lot of public attention. The media also perceive a role in holding public officials accountable. This has potential for creating adversarialness. While public officials should never believe they are friends with the

media, they should develop a relationship with the media before a crisis happens so that in the midst of the emergency the media focus more on the important news story that of keeping the public safe.

Finally, the press conference can be a valuable tool in reaching the public and providing information that will allow the public to make life saving decisions in disaster situations. A key to effective community response in an emergency is good public information. The press is one of the primary ways of reaching the public in a disaster. The press conference can be a valuable tool in keeping the media current and providing the public up-to-date information in a catastrophe. While most communities prepare extensively in the event of a disaster, “how many of them are prepared to face the media when tragedy strikes? Who will face the press and what will they say? Or, perhaps more importantly, how will they say it?” (Folkerts, 1999) This study and further studies of the disaster press conference can provide guidance to public officials and PIOs in working with the media when disaster strikes so the public is better informed in an emergency.

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