

Marc Compte-Pujol / Joan Cuenca-Fontbona /
Paula Pineda-Martínez (eds.)

Sorting Out the Chaos for Public Relations Leaders

Disruptive change has become the new normal for organizations and society. War conflicts, climate change and drought, poverty and inequality or the silent increase in violence, abuse and exploitation are some of the most relevant events of today with economic, political, technological, and social consequences that are still unpredictable for organizations and their audiences. Public relations can help organizations solve the challenges in this context because the strategic communication that defines it is one of the essential elements that promote organizational agility: they reduce ambiguity and uncertainty because it is based on research, they inform the public on organizational changes to project positive images and achieve support and alliances and seek constant interaction with stakeholders through two-way communication.

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Preface

In this preface, I have the privilege of introducing a group of Portuguese, Spanish, and Latin American scholars' timely edited publication, "Sorting out the chaos for public relations leaders." As a long-time colleague of this distinguished group of academics and a member of the boards of several U.S.-based and international organizations dedicated to the advancement of public relations research and practice, I was immediately drawn into the compelling set of topics the authors have documented, especially on countries and regions underrepresented in the public relations body of knowledge. The authors, who are experts in their respective fields, offer insights and analyses based on empirical research and theoretical frameworks, using a variety of methods, such as discourse and content analyses, quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, and comprehensive literature reviews.

This edited volume has been coordinated by Marc Compte-Pujol, a full-time lecturer of advertising, communication, and public relations at Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and a part-time lecturer at Blanquerna—Ramon Llull University in Barcelona, Spain; Joan Cuenca-Fontbona, Tenured professor of strategic communication and public relations at Blanquerna; and Paula Pineda-Martínez, assistant professor of strategic communication and public relations at the University of the Basque Country.

From the first chapter on, readers will learn about the complexity of the study and practice of public relations in an increasingly conflict-ridden world, and the demanding responsibilities of leaders to manage communications and the reputational and relational challenges in times when audiences are greatly segmented, the media environment is fragmented, and the geopolitical, economic, and social landscapes are in flux. A time when public relations professionals need to become trusted advisers to top management and social listeners to capture the dynamic nature of issues, contexts, and stakeholders.

Throughout these chapters, a clear picture of the disruptive changes that have become the new normal for organizations and society is explained and supported by primary data, relevant citations, cases, and illustrations. These changes include armed conflicts in several latitudes, extreme climate events, and large economic gaps among segments of the population that produce poverty and inequality with the potential for violence, among other phenomena with unpredictable consequences for organizations and their stakeholders.

Bianca Persici Toniolo, and Hugo Sampaio

From technical specialist to government authority: Media training in risk and crisis communication

Abstract: In this chapter, we assessed the discourse of the Portuguese Civil Protection spokesperson, Patrícia Gaspar, during events of risk and crisis triggered by natural disasters of meteorological phenomena. We used the qualitative method of discourse analysis to verify whether the voice of the technical expert or that of the political authority prevails in her communication. We also discussed verbal and nonverbal aspects of the spokesperson's communicative performance and to what extent the interventions denote preparation with media training strategies and techniques, with the purpose of obtaining the best results with risk and crisis communication. The study concluded that the voice as a government authority predominated in the interviews given to the media by the spokesperson for Civil Protection during the fires and floods (see Table 1) and that the verbal aspects of the preparation of her communication stood out compared to the nonverbal ones (see Table 2).

Keywords: verbal communication, nonverbal communication, framing, spokesperson, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The effects of climate change can be felt across the Earth. Its consequences include intense droughts, water shortages, severe fires, rising sea levels, polar ice melting, catastrophic storms and reduced biodiversity. A report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2021) emphasized that the Mediterranean region, in which Portugal is located, is especially vulnerable to extreme events resulting from climate change. In the country, these phenomena have taken place in urban areas, with intense and persistent precipitation, followed by floods, and, in rural areas, with large forest fires.

The fires of 2022 consumed 110 thousand hectares, the largest of which reached Serra da Estrela, with 28 thousand hectares burnt in eleven days (ICNF, 2022). Firefighting operations during the summer involved more than 12,000 operatives, 3,000 teams, 2,800 vehicles and 60 aerial firefighting aircrafts. Four people—two operatives and two elderly citizens—died as a result of the fires (SIC Notícias, 2022).

The rainfall in the Lisbon metropolitan region broke records in December 2022. Just between the 12th and 13th, rainfall reached 134.6 liters per square meter at the meteorological station of the Geophysical Institute in the Portuguese capital, the highest volume ever recorded at that station (Dias, 2022). The floods caused one fatality and affected millions of people. Insurance companies estimate that the economic losses exceed 18 million euros between insurances with houses, commercial establishments and vehicles (Afonso, 2022).

In charge of the operational response to natural disasters is the National Authority for Emergency and Civil Protection (ANEPC), a direct state administration body under the Ministry of Internal Administration. During the tragic rural fires of 2017, the then Second National Operational Commander of ANEPC and current Secretary of State for Civil Protection (SEPC), Patrícia Gaspar, became known as the spokesperson for the organization. Before taking on a political role in 2019, she accumulated over 20 years of experience in Civil Protection, which led her to aggregate two types of characteristics of spokespersons indicated in situations of risk and crisis: technical expertise and government authority. Patrícia Gaspar herself stated, when invited to join the Portuguese Government, her lack of political experience (Tavares-Teles, 2022). Therefore, we suppose the possible application of communicational strategies of media training that, throughout these three years as Secretary of State, contributed to developing her qualities as a spokesperson.

A study conducted by Gonçalves et al. (2021) revealed that Portuguese citizens believe technical expert spokespersons more than government authorities. Therefore, when it comes to contributing to risk perception and encouraging compliance with safety instructions, government communication should appeal to sources capable of promoting confidence concerning the capability of public organizations to respond to emergency situations. However, during a catastrophe, the dissemination of messages that aggregate technical and political information at the same time generates results not only in the population's behavior but also in organizational reputation (Olsson, 2014), which makes Patrícia Gaspar a potentially ideal spokesperson for our empirical study.

In this study, it is important to evaluate if during an emergency the Portuguese Civil Protection spokesperson addresses the population, through the media, as a technical expert or as a governmental authority. It is also of value to verify to what extent their interventions denote a preparation with media training strategies and techniques, with the purpose of creating more favorable conditions and making the best use of risk and crisis communication.

2. Literature review

2.1 Risk and crisis communication during natural disasters

Crisis and risk communication are specialized areas studied by public relations and strategic communication authors. Government public relations are a "weapon of power" (Cutlip, 1976, p. 5) defined as the "efforts to inform, interact with, influence, and protect multiple domestic and international publics in order to push forward democracy, serve public goods, defend human rights, and ethically gain public trust and support under normal and extreme circumstances" (Dong et al., 2023, p. 9). One of the research themes in government public relations is risk and crisis communication, which observes government communication and relationship management evolving risks, disasters and crisis responses, as well as political reputation repair. Once the public information model, characterized by one-way dissemination of information, is the model that predominates in government public relations activities (Grunig & Jaatinen, 1999; Valentini, 2013), the spokesperson performance is strictly relevant, especially in extreme situations.

Disaster communication represents an enormous challenge for public actors and organizations. Increasingly intense and frequent, the occurrence of disasters originating from climate change in various parts of the world reinforces the importance of a communication paradigm that contributes to ensuring the safety of the population ahead of protecting political reputation (Olsson, 2014). One of these paradigms is Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC). Developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the agency responsible for health security in the United States, in 2002, as a result of the bioterrorist attacks after September 11. CERC was born as a manual and, over the years, has evolved into a model applied not only to public health issues but also to natural disasters and terrorism. Being prescriptive, its purpose is to facilitate communication planning and media relations during emergency situations in a large country with a federative organization, as is the case of the United States, which leads any risk and crisis management to involve a wide variety of agencies at national, state and municipal levels (Reynolds & Seeger, 2014; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

Within the scope of models specifically adjusted toward disaster communication, the IDEA Model (Sellnow et al., 2017) is focused on the design of effective instructional messages before and during high-risk events. At the message level, the purpose of IDEA is to assist recipients in internalizing the potential impact of the risk, offer a brief and intelligible explanation of the nature of the crisis and recommend a specific action. At the distribution level it is geared toward facilitating communication professionals to identify appropriate

channels and strategies for message distribution. The tests conducted by the authors in the United States and Sweden found that the instructional message elaborated according to the criteria established in the IDEA model shows greater effectiveness in terms of self-protective behavioral intentions (Sellnow et al., 2019).

In relation to reputational aspects, according to the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), forest fires and floods are a type of natural disaster that has public actors/organizations also as a victim of the crisis, implying weak attributions of responsibility and moderate reputational threat. Due to failures in prevention or insufficient means of combat, public actors and organizations can be blamed for the extent of damage from a natural disaster, which gives them strong attributions of responsibility and severe reputational threats (Coombs, 2019).

According to Yamori (2020), public organizations involved in natural disaster management are not able to establish a dialogue with citizens. They perform reactive communication for a passive population dependent on the information, often ambiguous, disseminated by government authorities. Part of this difficulty lies in the misunderstanding of the differences between the concepts of risk and crisis by communication professionals in the public context, which implies the need for different spokespersons and messages. Thus, the lack of preparation of spokespersons may compromise the effectiveness and, consequently, the quality of the communication disseminated. Occurring in a risk or crisis context, the consequences of unprepared communication can be aggravated for both the public and the reputation of those involved (De Waele et al., 2020).

2.2 Types of spokespersons in risk and crisis situations

A spokesperson is someone who publicly represents individuals or organizations. Their role is to convey information to the public or the media in order to ensure that the message is consistent and accurate. A spokesperson can also be someone whose messages are quoted in content produced by communication consultancies, or someone who lends their voice to endorse messages in journalistic content or advertising campaigns.

There are different types of spokesperson, depending on the type of organization, the type of crisis and the purpose of the communication. In any case, the ability to establish clear and effective communication is a crucial skill for a spokesperson. The technical specialist spokesperson is usually assigned because he or she has specific knowledge of a technical area and is thus able to provide accurate and reliable information on topics whose coverage is carried

out by specialized journalists (Sánchez-Calero, 2006). The political authority type spokesperson is responsible for communicating the position of a political party, government or public organization to the media.

In communicating a natural disaster, technical experts voice messages about preparedness to address the upcoming risk and about relief and rescue operations. Political authorities, as far as they are concerned, are usually the most suitable spokespersons when the crisis has already been mitigated and the damage is being assessed (McLean & Ewart, 2015; Seeger et al., 2003; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013).

The spokespersons in natural disaster situations constitute a specific type. Their job is to ensure that accurate information about the event and safety measures are communicated clearly and in a timely manner to the public and the media. The spokespersons will relay critical information such as the extent of the disaster, the number of people affected and the organization's response. His/her role is to provide regular updates on the situation as well as safety instructions and recommendations to the public. Furthermore, he/she must also identify and correct false and inaccurate information that is circulating. A particularity of the spokesperson's role in disasters is the need to work closely with other organizations involved in the emergency response to ensure coordinated and consistent communication (Reynolds & Seeger, 2014).

The choice of who represents the ideas of an organization in the face of an audience during an emergency is a strategic decision that should consider the type of disaster in question, the message to be disseminated and the moment in the life cycle of the crisis. The designation of a single spokesperson can help the public assign a face to the event, contributing to the construction of the meaning of a crisis, but authors such as Littlefield and Cowden (2006) advocate the designation of multiple spokespersons to communicate with audiences from different cultural groups at times of crisis. In the mediatization process of natural disasters, the spokesperson of the public organizations involved take up a central role in the construction of the narrative about the event, reflecting the official positioning of the Executive Branch on the perception of risk, the framing of the crisis and the reality after the mitigation of the disaster (Lozano-Ascencio et al., 2017).

2.3 Media training and preparation of spokespersons

Media training aims to prepare spokespersons to interact with the media, to enable them to discuss with journalists in journalistic language (Mafei, 2008), but also to handle microphones and cameras, to understand what news is, to

speak objectively and clearly, and to be direct in their communication. The objective of media training is to optimize the dissemination of information that, intermediated by the media, is directed to a lay or non-specialist audience (Assad & Passadori, 2009).

In the late 1980s, Fitzgerald and Wahl argued that, in order to mitigate misinterpretations or translations of medical jargon, health professionals should be trained in communication techniques (Araújo & Ruão, 2014). Also, authors dedicated to crisis communication recommend that spokespersons should turn to and adopt media training to engage with the media (Coombs, 2015), which many actually do. Two surveys conducted in U.S. organizations showed that almost 70 % of these provide preparation to their corporate spokespersons at least once a year (Lee, Woeste & Heath, 2007) and that this is the most common form of enablement in the context of crisis preparedness (Cloudman & Hallahan, 2006). Thus, media training should include strategies for interlocution in a crisis context to provide responses to tendentially negative and spectacularized media coverage (Lozano-Ascencio, Sánchez-Calero & Morales-Corral, 2017).

Despite the long temporal bridge that separates credibility, emotiveness and rationality of the discourse present in Aristotle's rhetoric (ca. 350 B.C./2018), this secular matrix remains for a successful verbal communication in contemporary times. Notably in crisis communication, this concept innovates with the inclusion of elements such as reputation, image repair, adequacy of the argument and persuasion to generate a discursive strategy that considers concerns, needs and motivations of the public (Benoit, 1995) for the self-defense of the organization in the face of a threat to its reputation (Gonçalves, 2011). In this logic and in the field of nonverbal communication, already in the middle of the last century the pioneer studies of the Palo Alto school identified seminal processes of personal interaction and established concepts such as the communicational paradox—as a contradiction between what is perceived by verbal and nonverbal communication—the universality of facial expressions of emotions (Ekman, 2003) or even the influence of the dimension of the space where the communication occurs, described in the theorization about proxemics (Hall & Schmid, 2007).

In the context of the communication of spokespersons with the media and the direct communication with the public, media training and communicative performance, especially in the dimensions of verbal speech and nonverbal communication, may be determinant in a more successful transfer of information. Moreover, different sources have different guidelines and focuses for this training. While research by Gorn et al. (2008) and Claeys and Cauberghe (2014) focused on content and some nonverbal aspects of communication,

practical media training manuals devote more attention to verbal aspects of training (De Waele et al., 2020).

It also seems important to point out that research from disciplines outside communication sciences can add useful information. Experiments in Psychology show that when political speakers avoid critical questions during a debate—by answering a different yet similar question—the audience often misses the strategy and does not evaluate the speaker more negatively (Rogers & Norton, 2011), and these insights may offer an empirical basis for the use of interdisciplinary bridges.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research problem

This study aims to answer two research questions related to interviews granted by the Civil Protection spokesperson to the media during two specific risk and crisis situations that took place in the year 2022: the forest fires in Portugal and the floods in the Lisbon metropolitan region.

Research Question 1 (RQ1)—In the messages issued by the Civil Protection spokesperson, does the voice of the technical expert or that of the government authority predominate?

Research Question 2 (RQ2)—What media training strategies are identified—or absent—in the communication of the Civil Protection spokesperson with the media?

To answer these questions, we start with the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1)—The voice of government authority predominates in the interviews granted to the media by the Civil Protection spokesperson during fires and floods.

Hypothesis 2 (H2)—The verbal aspects of the communication of the Civil Protection spokesperson via the media stand out in relation to the nonverbal aspects.

3.2 Variables

This research is guided by the interpretative paradigm with the aim of identifying patterns in the Secretary of State's communications. To answer the research questions, we applied the qualitative method of discourse analysis (Daymon & Holloway, 2011), and examined four variables in the spokesperson's communications.

Variable 1 (V1)—Framing: An approach with a rhetorical perspective that involves the inclusion, exclusion and emphasis of certain information in a message (Hallahan, 1999). Thus, the choice of framing reflects the behavior the sender hopes to influence his audience with. This statement is in line with Hallahan's (1999) model of action framing, according to which the presentation of consequences in positive or negative terms influences an individual's behavior. Technical expert spokespersons tend to focus their messages on the harms (Seeger et al., 2003) that may arise from agreeing or refusing with guidance given by public actors and organizations, while political spokespersons more often address the positive consequences of the actions presented in their speeches.

Variable 2 (V2)—Audience: Technical experts tend to address their messages to a particular audience. In these cases, the target audience is addressed with verbs and pronouns in the second- and third-person singular (e.g., you, the citizen, each one). Messages issued by political spokespersons, on the other hand, are usually addressed to a universal audience, making use of second- and third-person plural (e.g., we, you, the population, everyone) (Seeger et al., 2003; Sellnow et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2022).

Variable 3 (V3)—Verbal communication: The use of soundbites—short sentences of immediate apprehension—is a communicative strategy developed in media training to increase the potential for retention of the message in the memory of the public from the diffusion of easily repeatable sequences. Also, the “translation” of expressions in language unintelligible to the general public, known as technical jargon, into colloquial language (Mateus, 2022) is one of the recommendations recommended in the preparation of spokespersons.

Variable 4 (V4)—Nonverbal communication: The media training manuals recommend that the spokesperson should always maintain firm and serene eye contact with his or her interlocutor to give him or her more credibility. Gaze aversion, therefore, consists in avoiding looking directly at the interviewer. Still in the nonverbal aspects of the training of spokespersons, the use of linguistic canes, with the use of phonetic elements without content, such as “ahhh” and “hummm,” is highlighted to be aware of this feature that can impair clarity (De Waele & Clays, 2017; Henningsen, 2005; Mateus, 2022).

3.3 Sample

The study sample is composed of eight videos (see Table 1) with interviews or statements of the Portuguese Civil Protection spokesperson, Patrícia Gaspar, published in the websites of the private Portuguese open television networks SIC Notícias and TVI. Regarding forest fires, we gathered five videos aired between

July 19 and August 19, 2022. Regarding floods, the three videos forming the sample cover the period between December 8 and 16, 2022.

Table 1. Samples's summary

Video	Date	Duration	Channel	Title	URL
A	19/07/2022	00:18:11	SIC Notícias	Interview with the Secretary of State for Civil Protection	https://bit.ly/3RNE4c6
B	30/07/2022	00:07:35	SIC Notícias	SIRESP failures: Secretary of State reinforces “operation and not network problems”	https://bit.ly/3VJxrst
C	30/07/2022	00:00:33	SIC Notícias	Secretary of State for Civil Protection reacts to SIRESP failures in Leiria fires	https://bit.ly/3LA0Ybk
D	30/07/2022	00:01:28	SIC Notícias	Portugal will not return to alert status	https://bit.ly/3L739uY
E	19/08/2022	00:00:27	SIC Notícias	Country may be divided in the coming days between Alert and Contingency	https://bit.ly/3XNiN6a
F	08/12/2022	00:10:37	TVI	Bad weather: “We have no reason to talk about failures,” says Secretary of State for Civil Protection	https://bit.ly/4cqH32I
G	14/12/2022	00:06:05	TVI	Bad weather in Lisbon: “Situation should worsen again tonight,” but the scenario will not be so complicated	https://bit.ly/4eKKdzC
H	16/12/2022	00:01:00	SIC Notícias	Floods: Government explains why warning messages were not sent to the population	https://bit.ly/3VYItLM

Source: authors' own.

After sample collecting, the researchers carried out four rounds of video analysis, one round for each variable. The data and the researchers' impressions were recorded in a grid divided into four sections: video identification, discourse characteristics, media training aspects and researchers' notes.

4. Results

4.1 Framing

The analysis of the videos with the participation of the Civil Protection spokesperson, Patrícia Gaspar, shows, in relation to the framing variable, a more political than technical posture. In three of the eight videos, the message was focused exclusively on the positive consequences of the action referred to in the speech, for example, when the spokesperson announces that, since 2021, Civil Protection has invested in an increasingly preventive action: "The more we manage to join this dimension of self-protection with the work that is being done by the different institutions, the more resilience we will have and the more capacity we will have at the community level to react to these situations" (Video F). This framework can also be observed in Video C, in which the referred Secretary of State mentions that "the situation was promptly solved," when questioned by journalists about the defects in the Portuguese Integrated System of Emergency and Safety Networks (SIRESP) during the fires in Leiria; and in Video E, when she states that she has "a perfectly stabilised device that allows, and has allowed, to respond not only effectively, but also with great flexibility to the fires."

In one video only (Video A) we verified the existence of concomitant messages with positive and negative action framing. On the one hand, framed in the fact that the spokesperson stated that operations were running as planned with a satisfactory response from the emergency system, but that, even so, Civil Protection would reinforce the teams by hiring 500 more firefighters. On the other hand, focusing on the negative consequences of the action, the spokesperson appealed to the Portuguese not to stay in the forest areas and to avoid risky behavior under penalty of severe fires, as the climatic conditions made the fire spread very quickly.

The remaining four videos (Videos B, D, G and H) have no messages focusing on the consequences of action.

4.2 Audience

Regarding the audience variable, the analysis of the videos also reveals the predominance of the voice of the political authority over that of the technical expert, as in the eight videos in the sample, the spokesperson refers to a universal audience. The audiences mentioned by the spokesperson are, namely, "the Portuguese" (Videos A, F and G), "the communities" (Videos A and F), "the people" (Videos F and G), "the populations" (Videos F and G), "the immigrants" (Video B), "the tourists" (Video B), "the operatives" (Video B) and "the media" (Video G).

In six of the eight videos, Patrícia Gaspar uses the third-person plural (pronoun "we") to speak on behalf of the Portuguese Government (Videos, A, B, E, F, G and H). In three of the six videos, she uses verbal periphrases in the passive voice without explaining the agents of the action to answer the journalists' questions (Videos B, C and D), with expressions such as "it was clarified," "they were quickly resolved," "they should be implemented" and "the guidelines were given," these taken from Video C. In Videos F and G, the spokesperson also used the first person singular (pronoun "I"), which characterizes the emotive function of language, typical of political speeches.

In two videos, the Secretary of State takes advantage of her time with the media to call for safe behavior in emergency situations, but always addressing universal audiences, as when she asked "people to stay as much as possible at home, restricting movement in the street to what is absolutely necessary" in case of floods (Video G). Or when he addressed the Emigrante Chama campaign, reinforcing the alert and giving guidance on safe behavior in view of the high risk of fires (Video B).

4.3 Verbal communication

In three of the eight videos analyzed, the spokesperson uses soundbites such as "the challenge of a generation," "we have a real time bomb" or "Emigrante Chama,"¹ the title of the campaign aimed at Portuguese emigrants returning to their country of origin during the summer season.

Technical jargon was used in only two of the videos observed, with recourse to terms such as 'shadow zones,' a reference to territories where there were failures in operational communications and 'talk groups,' designations that refer to the technological structure of the communications network.

The main impressions we can draw from the spokesperson's verbal communication are the assumption, before the media, that technical explanations

1 'Chama' also translates to 'flame,' therefore with a dual meaning.

are not easy to provide and that “it is not possible to explain better” (Video B), with justification based on the very technical nature of the matter in question; and the use of negative adjectivation—such as, for example, “bad operation of telecommunications by the operatives” (Video B).

4.4 Nonverbal communication

In five of the eight videos, the spokesperson demonstrates gaze aversion (see Figure 1 and Figure 2), the most present attribute in her communicational performance and with a very significant expression: about 70 identified moments. Considering what was exposed in the literature review, this nonverbal aspect is usually associated with negative characteristics and/or behaviors of the spokespersons. The linguistic canes found, defined by De Waele and Clayes (2017) as a nonverbal vocal aspect of communication, are punctual and not very relevant, being present in only two of the eight analyzed videos and with low preponderance.



Figure 1. Eye contact.
Source: CNN Portugal.



Figure 2. Gaze aversion.
Source: CNN Portugal.

As other relevant nonverbal communication aspects, we identified: occasional exaggerated gesticulation (see Figure 3); frequent sideways body movement, which may hinder the framing or be partially out of the plan; very present lateral head movements; body posture, when seated, tending to bend at the level of the shoulders; variable clothing, between casual and more formal and sober; interlacing of hands during questions from interviewers (denoting some uneasiness); interlacing of fingers during answers (a potentially distracting grimace); pointing at the subordinate in an apparent attempt to delegate the answers presented by the journalists; metallic sound resulting from the clash of rings when joining hands; on some occasions, the use of totally black clothing and hair tied up. One aspect that we considered particularly important was the facial expression, in the form of a very open and pronounced smile, when faced with questions raised by journalists in a tense interview context. This style was not constant, as there were communications in a more neutral tone and facial expression.



Figure 3. Vigorous gesticulation.

Source: SIC Notícias.

Table 2. Hypotheses and results

Hypothesis	Description	Result
H1	The voice of government authority predominates in the interviews granted to the media by the Civil Protection spokesperson during the fires and floods.	Confirmed
H2	The verbal aspects of the preparation of the communication of the Civil Protection spokesperson via the media stand out in relation to the nonverbal aspects.	Confirmed

Source: authors' own.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we assessed the speech of the Portuguese Civil Protection spokesperson, Patrícia Gaspar, during risk and crisis situations triggered by natural disasters of meteorological origin. Our objective was to verify which of the spokesperson profiles prevails in her communication given that she brings together two competences—technical and political—that are hardly found in members of the Portuguese Government (Silveira, 2022). We also discussed the Secretary of State's communicative performance and whether her interventions showed evidence of a preparation with media training strategies and techniques.

Regarding RQ1, the data led us to conclude that the voice of government authority predominated in the interviews given to the media by the Civil Protection spokesperson during the fires and floods, confirming H1. Thus, from the empirical study carried out, we believe that, in the face of situations of risk and crisis, in the communication, via the media, of a spokesperson who aggregates technical and political characteristics, the voice of the political authority will tend to prevail.

As we could observe in the videos that incorporate the sample, the Secretary of State speaks with property on technical issues concerning the operations, making permanent use of data, numbers and statistics. However, when questioned by a journalist (Video A) about the claimed success of a firefighting operation in Serra da Estrela, despite the catastrophic results of the rural fires in that region—30 % of the forest burnt down—the spokesperson was asked to respond as a technician, not a politician. The journalist asked her to explain in layman's terms how two such contradictory statements (success in the operation versus burning of huge forest area) could be considered positive in the Portuguese Government's assessment.

Corroborating our conclusion was the spokesperson's expedient to two reparative response strategies of the SCTT (Coombs, 2015). Oriented toward the negative effects on organizational reputation implied in crisis situations, the answers envisaged in SCTT are aligned with a political discourse, since the instructive and adjustment information, aimed at ensuring the physical and psychological safety of those involved, at the outset have already been given. Furthermore, we identified the following responses categorized by SCTT: reminds stakeholders that the organization is also a victim of the crisis and praises and/or thanks the work of other stakeholders involved.

In respect of RQ2, the data examined under the variables that reflect media training strategies point to an apparent limited preparation of the spokesperson, so it appears that the Secretary of State prepared herself for the interviews, hearings and statements under the focus of this study. The main gaps identified were the generalized absence of soundbites capable of synthesizing and optimizing the intelligibility of messages that were sometimes too technical and, almost always and given the context of a natural disaster; the inability to avoid excessive moments of gaze aversion when interacting with journalists, running the risk of a connotation with discomfort, distraction, deception or even lack of interest or involvement, shyness, anxiety. There are situations in which aversion to eye contact with the interlocutor is associated with disrespect, which is not at all evident in our observation. The use of technical jargon and linguistic canes is

residual, which does not affect or condition the generality of the Civil Protection spokesperson's discursive performance.

Also, in the category of nonverbal communication, we observed a body posture that tends to be mobile, a factor that may denote some nervousness, but above all compromises the framing of the video, an aspect that, despite being technical, becomes unusual and distracting.

The nonverbal aspects of paralinguistics—such as timbre, tone of voice, volume, and rhythm—were not the object of this study, even though they may denote confidence, sarcasm, excitement, and hesitation, significantly affecting the perception and understanding of messages, besides conveying relevant contextual data, such as the emotional state of the spokesperson. However, given their relevance, we believe that they should be considered in future studies with a broader scope.

H2 is confirmed as from the perspective of the effectiveness and quality of communication of the Civil Protection spokesperson, the verbal attributes dominated over the nonverbal ones. The empirical study showed that the government spokespersons associated with media communication in risk and crisis scenarios are probably better prepared in terms of discursive strategies but demonstrate gaps in nonverbal preparation for the media clash and, ipso facto, lack capacity-building strategies, namely through media training.

In short, on the one hand, government communication professionals are faced with the challenge of making emergency communication more strategic, with planning based on important models (Coombs, 2019; Reynolds & Seeger, 2014; Sellnow & Seeger, 2013; Sellnow et al., 2017, 2019), to ensure a correct perception of risk and to guarantee the safety of the population. On the other hand, no less important is to promote trust in the authorities and the positive reputation of actors and organizations involved in managing the event, values that are fundamental to strengthen the adherence of the population to the instructions conveyed to them in situations of risk and crisis (Gonçalves et al., 2021). At this juncture, it is pertinent to channel government communication on disasters not only to the media but also directly to the population, through digital social networks, to establish a dialogue (Yamori, 2020), a closer communication that increases the degree of people's commitment to their safety in the event of disasters. At the message level, the appropriate use of the framings of action (positive or negative) according to the objectives, channels and audiences of the message are factors that contribute to the effectiveness of communication. At the audience level, different social groups are affected in different ways by disasters and, as we have seen in our study, spokespersons with political characteristics tend to direct their messages to homogeneous audiences, so an alternative is

to designate spokespersons for varied communication objectives and audiences (Littlefield & Cowden, 2006). From the point of view of the preparation of spokespersons, the results led us to consider it important to clarify the panorama of media training practiced in Portugal and especially in the sphere of political and public communication. Training strategies remain a little explored, undervalued and possibly little discussed or mentioned topic in light of a certain social taboo.

The main limitations encountered in this study relate to the impossibility of comparing the performance of the Secretary of State in the interviews analyzed with others prior to the period of performance in office. This limited time window posed an additional difficulty: the size of the available sample (i.e., a number of videos that was less than desirable). Another limitation was the analysis restriction by the inexistence of other spokespersons conveying messages in the same context and with the same level of responsibility. Finally, we did not detect the presence of videos or even content from the spokesperson addressed directly to the population, through digital social networks and, therefore, without media intermediation.

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Effective leadership in public relations in Latin America: The role of empathy for employee engagement

Abstract: During COVID-19 and in response to the demands of younger generations, many leaders in organizations could have changed their communication style and humanized the way they interact. This paper aims to understand the role of empathy in communication leadership and its effect in the work environment for Latin American PR practitioners. This study relies on several theories that suggest that the ability to have and show empathy is an important part of effective and servant leadership (Spears, 2002). Empathy enables leaders to show individualized levels of consideration to followers (e.g., Avolio & Bass, 1995), recognize the emotions of others (Rubin et al., 2005) and be aware of both self and context (Walumbwa et al., 2008). In addition, empathic communication allows leaders to connect with and respond to different stakeholders (Dolamore, 2019). Measures of empathy are adapted from the Emotional Competence Inventory (Boyatzis et al., 2000). A survey dataset has been collected from practitioners in 20 Latin American countries (N = 1,345), using SPSS for data analysis. The results show an increasing projection of empathy levels, and a correlation between the application of empathy in communication leadership and employee engagement.

Keywords: internal communication, employee engagement, emphatic leadership, Latin America

1. Introduction

During COVID-19 and also in response to the demands of younger generations, many leaders in organizations have changed their communication styles and humanized the way they interact. They show empathy when connecting with their teams, trying to understand their feelings and emotions, putting themselves in the other's shoes and taking an active interest in their concerns. The increase in empathy in communication could affect the work environment of communication professionals. Additionally, many organizations now encourage flexible, remote, and collaborative working in real time for interaction.

In Europe, recent studies (Zerfass et al., 2022) show that a large majority of professionals have experienced a strong increase during the pandemic in empathetic attitudes by their communication leaders. Specifically, those leaders