The Strategic Context of Political Communication

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Although political communication has been a thriving field of study in communication scholarship since its inception, the major focus of this area of research has been to explore the interrelationships among policymakers, news media, and public opinion with a heavy emphasis on one-way information flow and the role of news in impacting public perceptions, attitudes, and voting behavior (Knott Martinelli, 2011). For example, the classic studies of Lazarsfeld and colleagues examined the influence of news media on public opinion and voting behavior during the 1940 and 1944 U.S. presidential elections and explicated the two-step and multi-step flow models of communication (e.g., Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Katz, 1957). More recent research on agenda setting, priming, the spiral of silence, and framing has continued this trend of examining news media–public opinion relationships (e.g., Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 2004; Scheufele, 1999).

Similarly, the pattern in most strategic communication scholarship has been to investigate the impact of corporate communication, advertising, public relations, and marketing messages within a business setting. The focus of this research, albeit important, has left the influence of strategic communication in a political context under-examined from both a theoretical and an empirical standpoint, although there are exceptions (e.g., Manheim, 1991; 2011). Thus, the central emphasis of this chapter is to probe the role of strategic communication in politics. The aim is not to be totally comprehensive but to provide a broad overview of major perspectives and contexts in this area of strategic communication scholarship. To accomplish this, the chapter will compare the meta-perspectives on strategic political communication offered by political marketing and political public relations, explore the strategies prevalent in strategic political communication, offer a conceptual model and specific theoretical perspectives that are useful for understanding its impact, and conclude by presenting directions for future research.

Conceptual Orientations

A natural starting point for considering strategic communication in a political context is to identify its core qualities by looking at different definitions. According to Hallahan, Holtzhausen, Ruler, Verčič and Sriramesh (2007), strategic communication is defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (p. 3). From a corporate communication perspective, Argenti, Howell and Beck (2005) define it as “communication aligned with the company’s overall strategy, to enhance its strategic positioning” (p. 83). Finally, the term has been used in military circles and defined as “the orchestration and/or synchronization of actions, images, and words to
achieve a desired effect” (U.S. Department of Defense, 2008, p. 4). Thus, one major characteristic that separates strategic communication from other types of communication is that it is intentional and objectives-driven. In politics, the two major aims that strategic communication supports are campaigning and governing, although these aims are often separated, as shown during elections when staff for an incumbent’s campaign are typically separate from his or her governance personnel. At the same time, the rise of permanent campaigning has served to blur the boundaries between campaigning and governing (Blumenthal, 1980). In either case, strategic political communication can be used to achieve objectives in elections and policymaking. It can also be used for aims such as increasing internal cohesion or shaping media coverage.

Another major theme in definitions of the term is the emphasis on being “strategic.” Prior research suggests four major contexts where a strategic orientation is important in politics: the electoral arena, internal arena, parliamentary arena, and media arena (Sjöblom, 1968a; Nord, 1997; Strömbäck, 2007). According to Botan (2006), the term “strategic” subsumes the two overlapping concepts of grand strategy and strategy. Grand strategy refers to “the policy-level decisions an organization makes about goals, alignments, ethics, and relationship with publics and other forces in its environment,” strategy to “the campaign-level decision making involving maneuvering and arranging resources and arguments to carry out organizational grand strategies,” and tactics to “the specific activities and outputs through which strategies are implemented—the doing or technical aspect of public relations” (Botan, 2006, p. 225–226). For strategic communication to be effective, their practitioners must be involved when making decisions on both grand strategy and strategy, and not confined to the role of technicians carrying out the tactics (Botan, 2006; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Hallahan et al., 2007; Pfau & Wan, 2006). For example, in political communication, an example of grand strategy is the approach used to win elections or govern effectively. An example of strategy might be to complete a fund-raising drive in support of a particular politician, and a tactic may comprise the specific social media messages used to complete such an effort.

To address what meta-perspectives provide the best understanding of strategic communication in politics, the authors suggest that political marketing and political public relations are perhaps the most promising (Strömbäck, Mitrook & Kiousis, 2010). Broadly speaking, political marketing has been defined as:

... the application of marketing principles and procedures in political campaigns by various individuals and organizations. The procedures involved include the analysis, development, execution, and management of strategic campaigns by candidates, political parties, governments, lobbyists and interest groups that seek to drive public opinion, advance their own ideologies, win elections, and pass legislation and referenda in response to the needs and wants of selected people and groups in society.

Newman, 1999, p. xiii

In comparison, Strömbäck and Kiousis (2011a) define political public relations as

the management process by which an organization or individual actor for political purposes, through purposeful communication and action, seeks to influence and to establish, build, and maintain beneficial relationships and reputations with its key publics to help support its mission and achieve its goals.

p. 14

The benefit of this comprehensive definition of political public relations is that it does not simplify it as news management or media relations, thereby relegating it to merely a technical function (e.g., Froehlich & Rüdiger, 2006).
The concepts of strategic political communication, political public relations, and political marketing are closely related. In particular, all three underscore the need for purposeful communication and management being focused in the sense that they should advance organizational missions and objectives. They are also all concerned with the interrelationships among multiple groups in the political arena. Nonetheless, there do seem to be some critical distinctions, especially between political marketing and political public relations. We suggest that political marketing and political public relations offer competing meta-perspectives for conceptualizing the role of strategic communication in a political context. Political marketing draws from consumer behavior literature and tends to treat political communication in much the same way as businesses selling products to customers (e.g., Cwalina, Falkowski & Newman, 2010; Scammell, 1999; Kotler, 1974). Thus, candidates are products, voters are consumers, and so forth. The flow of information is often viewed as a top-down, one-way transmission of messages and information. Some of the major strengths of political marketing, though, are its focus on reputation cultivation and controlled candidate communications in the political process, as well as its emphasis on continuously gathering market intelligence (Lees-Marchment, 2012).

One important aspect where political public relations differs from political marketing is that the latter deals with a wider range of stakeholders, such as members, interest groups and politicians from other parties, whereas the former tends to zero in more on voters than other groups (Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011a). Nonetheless, Hughes and Dann (2009) offer an instructive list of at least 17 stakeholder groups that can be identified as paramount in strategic political communication, political marketing, and political public relations: alternative political providers; electoral commissions, parliaments, government offices; industry lobby groups; issue competitors; media organizations; party donors; party members and supporters; political candidates; political opponents; private lobbyists; social pressure lobby groups; citizens and society at large; splinter interest groups; voters at election time; and voters between elections. Although this may not be the definitive list—as it depends on the organization and thus is contextual—it illustrates that there are a large number of organizations and groups that are relevant in the context of strategic political communication.

Other important ways in which political public relations differs from political marketing are that it underscores both short-term and long-term engagement with stakeholders, views the flow of information as multi-way among political organizations and their stakeholders, encompasses both organizational communication and action (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011b), and focuses less on the specific context of election campaigns, which political marketing tends to focus on. For these reasons, it can be argued that political public relations supplies a more comprehensive and inclusive view of strategic communication in politics than political marketing. The broader view of political engagement offered in political public relations incorporates not only a reputation management framework (short-term) but also a relationship cultivation framework (long-term) that both have significant theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for strategic political communication (to be explained further in the next section). Although a political public relations framework for understanding strategic political communication is to be preferred, it is not without its limitations, as political marketing may be more appropriate for studying specific tools such as political ads or particular campaigns.

**Political Public Relations Strategies**

Returning to the explication of Botan (2006) concerning grand strategy, strategy, and tactics, another benefit of adopting a political public relations framework is that a greater range of elements can be identified as being a part of the strategic communication process in politics. Smith (2009) explicates a variety of general public relations strategies that are defined as proactive versus reactive and are easily adapted to a political public relations and strategic communication setting. The proactive ones
include organizational performance, audience participation, special events, alliances and coalitions, sponsorships, activism, newsworthy information, and transparent communication. The reactive ones are prebuttal, attack, embarrassment, threat, denial, excuse, justification, concession, ingratiolation, disassociation, relabeling, concern, condolence, regret, apology, investigation, corrective action, restitution, repentance, and silence. It is noteworthy that these involve both communication and action, consistent with this chapter’s advocacy of a political public relations framework for studying strategic political communication.

Another perspective on strategies is offered by Hendrix (2007) but has a more specific emphasis on government relations and politics. Among the most effective are fact finding, coalition building, direct lobbying, grassroots activities, political action committees, political education activities, communications on political issues, and political support activities. A specific set of strategies developed for government media relations was offered by Baker (1997), who suggested most political communicators use approaches that are active, proactive, combination, or just “winging it.” The last is, of course, the least desirable, but it is important to note that the practice of strategic political communication may not coincide with normative ideals about how it should occur. Finally, Froehlich and Rüdiger (2006) asserted that framing can be viewed as a mobilization strategy in political public relations inasmuch as it brings certain topics and how they are portrayed into public and policymaking discourse.

Theoretical Perspectives

With respect to the concept of adopting a political public relations framework the better to understand strategic political communication, a common theme in the literature and definitions is a ubiquitous concern with both reputation and relationship development and maintenance. Applying the ideas of Hutton, Goodman, Alexander and Genest (2001) to a political context, political public relations and strategic communication can be seen as critical to all stages of stakeholder engagement, whether the latter involves an adolescent developing an allegiance to a political party or a lifelong volunteer for a civic organization aiming to recruit new voters. Important in this context is also the multiplicity of publics that are germane to political organizations, broadly conceived. Therefore views of political public relations and strategic communication that reduce these spheres to media relations, news management or voter relations, or that only focus on either short-term or long-term interactions between organizations and key publics, should be rejected. The concepts of reputation and relationship management are both central to capturing this short-term and long-term orientation regarding the engagement of political organizations and the multiplicity of their key stakeholders.

From this viewpoint, political public relations, in particular, is not limited to simple information dissemination and exchange for peripherally involved publics, but it is also not centered solely in the engagement of highly involved stakeholder groups such as major donors or activist groups. Consequently, conceptualizing political public relations and strategic political communication along a continuum of stakeholder engagement with reputation and relationship quality at each end can be
useful for understanding its study and practice (Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2011). Figure 25.1 illustrates this conceptualization.

**Relationship Cultivation**

A relationship cultivation approach has the most direct application to the right-hand side of the aforementioned engagement continuum (Figure 25.1). From this perspective, strategic political communication should be employed to develop and maintain quality relationships between political organizations and their key stakeholders. This can be conceptualized in terms of relationship maintenance strategies, indicators of relationship quality, and relationship outcomes (cf. Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997). In other words, this explication identifies relationship antecedents, processes, and consequences. In a study of the 2008 U.S. presidential election, Seltzer and Zhang (2008) explored the impact of the relationship maintenance strategies of mediated communication, social activities, interpersonal communication, and online communication on relationship quality with political parties along the dimensions of trust, satisfaction, commitment, control mutuality, and supportive behaviors. Their findings indicated that mediated communication was a significant predictor of relationship quality. In addition, strategies that were perceived as two-way and symmetrical were positively associated with relationship quality. Providing a final link to outcomes, they observed that voters with favorable relationships towards their own political party were more likely to vote for that party’s candidate. Collectively, this evidence offers empirical support for the continuum proposed earlier.

From a general public relations standpoint, Hon and Grunig (1999) identified the following as indicators of relationship quality: control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment. Ledingham (2011) identified the dimensions of trust, openness, satisfaction, access, mutual control, and responsiveness as arguably the most critical in determining relationship quality in a political public relations setting. It is worth recognizing that this approach goes beyond defining political public relations as communication to include actions and behaviors. Relevant outcomes in strategic political communication include favorable attitudes towards political candidates, parties, or legislation and supportive behaviors such as vote choice, vote intention, volunteering, donating, attending events, joining an organization, protesting, or engaging in activism (see Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011b).

Connected to the aforementioned engagement continuum, a natural application of the relational perspective is a better understanding of highly engaged constituencies such as major donors, volunteers, lobbyists, and highly partisan voters. Ledingham (2011) argues that the use of interpersonal communication and symbolic or actual behaviors is key to success in the political arena when a relational approach is being used. One caveat, though, with this type of perspective in a political context is that it is probably not feasible to adopt a fully relational interaction with all constituencies. At the same time, when strategic communication is applied to governing, all citizens can be considered stakeholders. For more low involvement publics, a reputation cultivation and management perspective may however be more appropriate and is explicated in further detail below.

**Reputation Management**

A second perspective that is useful for our understanding of strategic political communication is reputation management. According to Wartick (1992), corporate reputation is defined as “the aggregation of a single stakeholder’s perception of how well organizational responses are meeting the demands and expectations of many corporate stakeholders” (p. 34). Elsewhere, Gotsi and Wilson (2001), in a comprehensive review of several definitions, asserted that it is

a stakeholder’s overall evaluation of a company over time. This evaluation is based on the stakeholder’s direct experiences with the company, any other form of communication and
symbolism that provides information about the firm’s actions and/or a comparison with the actions of other leading rivals.

Looking at it from a multidimensional vantage point, Carroll (2010) notes that corporate reputation includes a “firm’s public prominence, its public esteem, and the series of qualities or attributes for which a firm is known” (p. 3). Similarly, Fombrun and Gardberg (2000) suggest the dimensions of vision and leadership, products and services, emotional appeal, work environment, social responsibility, and financial performance for defining reputation.

The application of reputation management to strategic political communication requires, of course, that it be moved out of the traditional business context. That is, the reputation concept is applied to political parties, leaders, nations, and so forth. A growing body of research has confirmed this application (Donsbach & Brade, 2011; Scammell, 1999). For example, Yang, Shin, Lee and Wrigley (2008) found a positive association between a perceived positive reputation of South Korea and preference for personal communication, national television, cable television, national newspapers, and libraries to obtain information about the country among a sample of U.S. citizens in 2006. Favorable reputations were connected with more supportive behavioral intentions towards the country. Country reputation in that study was defined as emotional appeal, physical appeal, financial appeal, leadership appeal, cultural appeal, global appeal, and political appeal. Wang (2006) suggested that positive country reputation is linked with favorable economic outcomes but did not test this empirically.

Also linked to agenda building and framing (described below), a related body of work on political candidate images has also illustrated the importance of reputation in strategic political communication. Such research has examined how the portrayals of political leaders in candidate communications, news media messages, and public opinion can closely correspond to one another. Among the most common attributes of the candidate images studied were credibility (does the candidate seem believable?), morality (do the candidate’s actions reflect well on his or her ethics or integrity?), intelligence (is this reflected in his or her knowledge or skills?), leadership (is he or she charismatic or inspiring?), ideology and issue positions (what are his or her policies?), and biographical information (details of his or her hometown or family) (Kiousis, Mitrook, Wu & Seltzer., 2006; Weaver, Graber, McCombs & Eyal, 1981). McCombs, Lopez-Escobar and Llamas (2000) found close links between the aspects of candidate images emphasized in political ads, news content, and voter perceptions during the 1996 Spanish general elections.

Although the application of corporate reputation to government communication and politics is not pervasive, scholars have noted that strategic communication is a key influence driving reputation in this setting (Canel & Sanders, 2012). Based on the explication earlier, reputation is distinguished in the literature from identity (what an organization is) and image (what stakeholders perceive). Given our emphasis on adopting a political public relations perspective, organizational action is obviously a major force impacting reputation as well. Based on the continuum, the application of a reputation management perspective in strategic political communication is most relevant for low engagement stakeholders. This is evident in the crisis communication literature that stresses the importance of effective crisis management to protect an organization’s reputation (Coombs, 2007). Such stakeholders might include last-minute voters, tourists, and temporary residents in a country.

**Agenda Building**

The third major theoretical approach from political public relations that is relevant to strategic communication is agenda building. Whereas the traditional focal point of agenda setting research has explored the transfer of issue salience from the media to public opinion, the expanded view of
agenda building has considered the reciprocal influence among various political stakeholders in the process of salience formation, exchange, and transfer (Berger, Hertog & Park, 2002; Kiousis, Laskin & Kim, 2011; Kiousis et al., 2006; Kiousis, Bantimaroudis & Ban, 1999; McCombs, 2004). Major political constituencies involved in this process include candidates, parties, government agencies, news media, voters, donors, volunteers, activists, and others.

Originally conceptualized in terms of issue salience, this also encompasses the salience of a variety of political objects and their attributes. Issues are but one category of object that includes stakeholders, political candidates, nations, and so forth. Attribute salience links the agenda building construct to framing by indicating that groups outside the media and public opinion play a major role in impacting how topics are discussed and portrayed in political discourse. Political public relations efforts, for instance, emphasize certain attributes while ignoring others and may thus lead to different interpretations, opinions, and behaviors connected to issues and policies.

Empirical support for agenda building has been gleaned in a number of investigations (e.g., Cobb, Ross & Ross, 1976; Kim, Xiang & Kiousis, 2011; Kiousis & Strömbäck, 2010; Kiousis & Wu, 2008; Ragas, Kim & Kiousis, 2011). The primary strategy for activating news attention in agenda building is the use of information subsidies. According to Gandy (1982), information subsidies can be defined as “efforts to reduce the prices faced by others for certain information in order to increase its consumption” (p. 8). Lieber and Golan (2011) succinctly define these types of subsidies as “the currency of the trade within the marketplace of information” (p. 60). The three most common forms of information subsidies are materials, spokespersons, and events (Hallahan, 2011).

Perhaps the most widely used and most studied type of information subsidy is the standard news release. News releases have been shown to play a meaningful role in shaping news coverage. Research, for example by Sweetser and Brown (2008), indicates that up to 80% of news content is generated from information subsidies, particularly in the form of news releases. A robust body of research has offered strong empirical support to suggest that the salience of objects in news releases contributes to the media agenda (McCombs, 2004; Turk, 1986; Wanta & Ghanem, 2007). Hopmann, Vliegenthart, Elmelund-Praestekaer, Albaek and De Vreese (2010), offered empirical evidence to confirm that the salience of issues in political party-controlled news releases shaped the salience of issues in media coverage during the 2007 national elections in Denmark, but the effectiveness of these news releases varied based on the party’s relevance to the country’s political system.

The stakeholder engagement continuum explicated above can be valuable in agenda building from a strategic communication standpoint. Questions that might arise during such a process might include: does a common set of priorities between a political organization and multiple stakeholder groups lead to stronger relationships and reputations? Such questions can be probed for both object and attribute salience, having key implications for strategic political communication messages, programs, and campaigns.

Issues Management

Related to agenda building, issues management in politics refers to the process by which politicians, campaigns, parties, and other political groups identify, prioritize, develop, and convey positions on key issues (Heath & Waymer, 2011). A fundamental early step in effective political issues management involves formative research where groups investigate the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of major constituencies concerning policy preferences and problems. Strategic political communication is a major part of how political groups aim to influence political discourse and policymaking during election and law-making periods.

A vital factor impacting the issues management process involves meaningfully classifying different types of issues. Research has offered several systems for categorizing issues. Specifically, the difference between obtrusive issues (those with which citizens have direct experience) and unobtrusive
issues (those with which citizens have little direct experience) has proved critical with regard to media influence on public perceptions of issue importance (Zucker, 1978). Research suggests that mass-media impact is greatest for unobtrusive issues. A similar distinction has been drawn between abstract and concrete issues, with empirical work detecting stronger media influence on perceptions for the latter issue type (Yagade & Dozier 1990). Beyond issue type, the tone and frames associated with issues are also relevant for issue-management purposes because they shape how issue portrayals are generated and the subsequent effects of these issue portrayals on various constituencies.

As in agenda building, the use of information subsidies by political groups or organizations to exert influence on news media, voters, and other groups represents a widespread approach for effective issues management via strategic communication. Among the most commonly used information subsidies are news releases, interviews, news conferences, social media messages, and “op-ed pieces.” Op-ed pieces are editorials written from a party other than a news outlet to advocate for a position on an issue relevant to the news organization and its community. From the realm of political marketing, political advertisements are also paramount in political issues management.

A major application of issues management in the aforementioned stakeholder engagement continuum is that it can be used to identify and develop strategies for emerging issues: those that are rising in policymaking and public circles, those that are receiving heavy attention, and those that have fallen off a major agenda. Various expositions of the lifecycle of an issue in the political science and communication literature could be enhanced with the incorporation of the stakeholder engagement continuum (Downs, 1972).

**Framing**

Although framing scholarship has an extensive literature in the general mass communication and political communication arenas, its application to strategic political public relation and communication merits additional scholarly attention. Hallahan (1999) explained the role of framing in public relations:

> In developing programs, public relations professionals fundamentally operate as frame strategists, who strive to determine how situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues and responsibility should be posed to achieve favorable objectives. Framing decisions are perhaps the most important strategic choices made in a public relations effort.

p. 224, emphasis in original

In political public relations, Hallahan (2011) later identified seven areas where framing is crucial, including situations, risks, supporting arguments, issues, responsibility, and stories. What distinguishes these perspectives on framing is that they do not solely consider the impact of framing on the relationship between news and public opinion. Just as multiple stakeholders and groups contribute to agenda building, the same can be said of those constituencies’ contribution to framing in the areas outlined by Hallahan (2011).

In looking at the use of framing by political leaders, Hänggli and Kriesi (2012) pinpointed three major framing choices made by politicians to gain a strategic advantage during campaigns: the “substantive emphasis choice”, the “oppositional emphasis choice” and the “content emphasis choice.” In the first, candidates must highlight which frames of their own they hope to emphasize through the campaigning period. For the second, they decide which frames from their opponent (or opponents) they will seek to emphasize. Presumably, it will be those in which they hold a perceived advantage. Finally, the third choice involves how much they will highlight the campaign competition itself. Among their findings are that candidates tend to highlight just one or two frames in their own communication activities and that they pay more attention to their opponents’ frames that are emphasized in media coverage as opposed to political ads.
Framing not only impacts strategic political communication in terms of campaigning but in terms of governing as well. Sellers (2010) explained the process by which members of the U.S. Congress use strategic communication to impact the salience and framing of issues in media coverage with the purpose of ultimately affecting policy outcomes. This process contains four stages. In the first, members of Congress create the message by identifying the issue, arguments, and frames that they want to emphasize in it. The second stage involves promoting the message through a collective effort with their political party. The third step involves engaging journalists to draw attention to it through various publicity efforts. In the final stage, journalists highlight the messages in news coverage, which subsequently impacts public opinion and feeds back to impacting policymakers.

A recent conceptual development in agenda setting and agenda building that is important to framing in strategic political communication is that the connections among elements on different agendas can impact the salience formation and transfer process (Guo & McCombs, 2011a; 2011b; Schultz, Kleinnijenhuis, Oegema, Utz & van Atteveldt, 2011; Schultz et al., 2012), as summarized by Vu, Guo and McCombs (2012):

Our new approach, which we have named the Network Agenda Setting Model, suggests that the news media can actually bundle different objects and attributes and make these bundles of elements salient in the public’s mind simultaneously. Drawing from Lang’s (2000) theoretical framework, the NAS model hypothesizes that the more likely the news media mention two elements in tandem, the greater chance that the audience will perceive these two elements as interconnected.

Hence, the co-occurrence of certain attributes and/or objects with one another leads to a greater likelihood that they will be perceived as salient together. This could range from a few elements on an agenda to the entire pattern of connections among elements. In political public relations and strategic communication, this can have major ramifications for how politicians and issues are portrayed and perceived in public affairs discourse. In turn, this can greatly influence outcomes in terms of campaigning and governing. For example, had the George W. Bush administration been unsuccessful in pairing Saddam Hussein and weapons of mass destruction in political discourse during its first term, it is possible that a different policy outcome might have been generated in dealing with Iraq as a threat to the United States after the 9/11 attacks.

Thus, framing processes are critical to the two fundamental aims of strategic political communication. The engagement continuum’s application to framing may be to serve as a heuristic device for understanding the process of frame resonance. Although the literature has identified both macro-level generic frames and micro-level topic-specific frames, the factors that make certain frames prominent even though others are marginalized remains unclear. Examining what types of frames are more consistently linked with reputation outcomes and relationship outcomes may offer insight into such questions.

Crisis Communication

Within the context of this chapter, the conclusive area central to the understanding of strategic communication in politics comprises crisis communication and management. Although typically viewed through the lens of business or non-profit organizations, the role of crisis communication in politics is critical (Coombs, 2011). Whether initiated by natural causes (e.g., a major earthquake) or engendered by humans (e.g., a military attack), the government’s crisis communication efforts are crucial to successful crisis management. Such efforts should be proactively developed and purposeful, and therefore are included as a part of strategic political communication. Although this falls under
the governance aspect of strategic political communication, the success in which governments at the local, state, regional, or national levels handle crises can alter election outcomes.

At a basic level, most scholars conceptualize crises in three phases: pre-crisis, crisis, and post-crisis (Coombs, 2012). Yet Coombs (2011) suggested that although there are similarities between political crisis communications and corporate crisis communication, major differences include crisis managers, crisis types, crisis constraints, and what defines indicators of success. In the first area, political crisis managers can be grouped in the following four categories: elected politicians, elected agencies, appointed bureaucrats, and appointed bureaucratic agencies where corporate crisis managers are normally appointed executives from within a company’s management structure. In the second area, Coombs notes that most corporations seek to avoid playing the “hero” role in a crisis whereas this possibility greatly increases in political crisis. In the third arena, politicians are much more likely to use an apology strategy because they are not as constrained by financial considerations as are businesses and corporations. In the fourth arena, government bureaucrats or agencies handling crisis management may take longer to respond to crisis situations because they do not face the same job security concerns as those who have been elected or who are in corporate communication circles.

Returning to the engagement continuum, we can see several applications to crisis communication. In particular, crisis communication strategies aimed at protecting reputation would be more appropriate for dealing with low-involvement stakeholders whereas those aimed at protecting relationships are most suitable for highly involved or engaged constituencies. For the former, an informative communication strategy may be most appropriate, whereas rectifying behavior and action may be necessary for the latter.

Conclusion

In summary, the role of strategic communication in politics is important and has been studied from an empirical and theoretical standpoint, although there is still a lack of empirical research firmly anchored in theories of political public relations and political marketing. The purpose of this chapter has been to trace this role in some detail. Set against the backdrop of two major meta-perspectives of political public relations and political marketing, the framework offered by political public relations has been suggested as the most comprehensive for understanding the influence of strategic political communication. An integrative conceptual model of stakeholder engagement has been offered to understand strategic political communication in terms of both reputation management and relationship cultivation. This chapter has demonstrated the application of the engagement continuum to areas such as agenda building, issue management, framing, and crisis communication. Given its potential in these settings, the authors believe there are applications for several other arenas of strategic political communication not covered in this chapter, such as fund raising and public diplomacy. The authors suggest future research could possibly explore these applications, which might expand theoretical, empirical, and practical knowledge associated with strategic political communication.

References


