2. Understanding crisis exploitation: leadership, rhetoric and framing contests in response to the economic meltdown

Paul 't Hart and Karen Tindall

1. Crises as political battlegrounds

Dramatic episodes in the life of a polity such as financial crises and major recessions can cast long shadows on the polities in which they occur (Birkland 1997, 2006; Baumgartner and Jones 1993, 2002; Lomborg 2004; Posner 2004).[1] The sense of threat and uncertainty they induce can profoundly impact people's understanding of the world around them. The occurrence of a large-scale emergency or the widespread use of the emotive labels such as 'crisis', 'scandal' or 'fiasco' to denote a particular state of affairs or trend in the public domain implies a 'dislocation' of hitherto dominant social, political or administrative discourses (Wagner-Pacifici 1986, 1994; Howarth et al. 2000). When a crisis de-legitimises the power and authority relationships that these discourses underpin, structural change is desired and expected by many ('t Hart 1993).

Such change can happen, but not necessarily so. In fact, the dynamics and outcomes of crisis episodes are hard to predict. For example, former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder miraculously emerged as the winner of the national elections after his well-performed role as the nation's symbolic 'crisis manager' during the riverine floods in 2002, yet the Spanish Prime Minister suffered a stunning electoral loss in the immediate aftermath of the Madrid train bombings of 2004. Former US President George W. Bush saw his hitherto modest approval ratings soar in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, but an already unpopular Bush Administration lost further prestige in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Likewise, public institutions can be affected quite differently in the aftermath of critical events: some take a public beating and are forced to reform (the National Aeronautics and Space Administration [NASA] after the *Challenger* and *Columbia* shuttle disasters); some weather the political storm (the Belgian gendarmerie after its spectacular failure to effectively police the 1985 European Cup Final at the Heysel Stadium in Brussels); others become symbolic of heroic public service (the New York City Fire Department after 9/11).

The same goes for public policies and programs. Gun-control policy in Australia was rapidly and drastically tightened after the 1996 Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania. Legislation banning 'dangerous dogs' was rapidly enacted in the United Kingdom after a few fatal biting incidents (Lodge and Hood 2002). And 9/11 produced a worldwide cascade of national policy reforms in areas such as policing, immigration, data protection and criminal law—for good or bad (cf. Klein 2007; Wolf 2007). In other cases, however, big emergencies can trigger big investigations and temporarily jolt political agendas but in the end do not result in major policy changes.

What explains these different outcomes? Most scholars writing about the nexus between crises, disasters and public policy note their potential agenda-setting effects, but have not developed explanations for their contingent nature and their variable impacts (Primo and Cobb 2003; Birkland 2006). The emerging literature on blame management has only just begun to address the mechanisms determining the fate of office-holders in the wake of major disturbances and scandals (Hood et al. 2007).

This literature suggests that the process of crisis exploitation could help to explain the variance in outcomes. Disruptions of societal routines and expectations open up two types of space for actors inside and outside government. First, *crises can be used as political weapons*. Crises mobilise the mass media, which will put an intense spotlight on the issues and actors involved. To the extent that they generate victims, damage and/or community stress, the government of the day is challenged to step in and show it can muster an effective, compassionate, sensible response. At the same time, it might face critical questions about its role in the very occurrence of the crisis. Why did it not prevent the crisis from happening? How well prepared was it for this type of contingency? Was it asleep at the wheel or simply overpowered by overwhelming forces outside its sphere of influence? In political terms, crises challenge actors inside and outside government to weave persuasive narratives about what is happening and what is at stake, why it is happening, how they have acted in the lead-up to the present crisis and how they propose we should deal with and learn from the crisis moving forward. Those whose narratives are considered persuasive stand to gain prestige and support; those who are found wanting can end up as scapegoats.

Second, *crises help 'de-institutionalise' hitherto taken-for-granted policy beliefs and practices* (Boin and 't Hart 2003). The more severe a current crisis is perceived to be, and the more it appears to be caused by foreseeable and avoidable problems in the design or implementation of the policy itself, the bigger is the opportunity space for critical reconsideration of current policies and the successful advancement of (radical) reform proposals (Keeler 1993; Birkland 2006; Klein 2007). By their very occurrence (provided they are widely felt and labelled as

such), crises tend to benefit critics of the status quo: experts, ideologues and advocacy groups already on record as challenging established but now compromised policies. They also present particular opportunities to newly incumbent office-holders, who cannot be blamed for present 'messes' but who can use these messes to highlight the need for policy changes they might have been seeking to pursue anyway.

The key currency of crisis management in the political and policy arenas is persuasion. More specifically, this study presumes that crises can be usefully understood in terms of *framing contests*—battles between competing definitions of the situation—between the various actors that seek to contain or exploit crisis-induced opportunity space for political posturing and policy change (cf. Alink et al. 2001). [2]

Crises invite four types of framing efforts, concerning 1) the nature and severity of a crisis, 2) its causes, 3) the responsibility for its occurrence or escalation, and 4) its policy implications. Actors inside and outside government will strive to have their particular interpretations of the crisis accepted in the media and by the public as the authoritative account ('t Hart 1993; Tarrow 1994; Brändström and Kuipers 2003; De Vries 2004; see also Stone 2001). In other words, they seek to 'exploit' the disruption of 'governance as usual' that emergencies and disturbances entail: to defend and strengthen their positions and authority, to attract or deflect public attention, to get rid of old policies and sow the seeds of new ones (Keeler 1993). When a particular 'crisis narrative' takes hold, it can be an important force for non-incremental changes in policy fields that are normally stabilised by the forces of path dependence, inheritance and veto-playing (Hay 2002; Kay 2006; Kuipers 2006).

This chapter provides the analytical framework that has guided this comparative study of leader rhetoric and media responses to that rhetoric during the escalation stage of the global economic downturn. We place this rhetoric within the broader context of what we have elsewhere referred to as *crisis exploitation* (Boin et al. 2009). We define crisis exploitation as the purposeful utilisation of crisis-type rhetoric to significantly alter levels of political support for incumbent public office-holders and existing public policies and their alternatives. By studying and interpreting leaders' crisis rhetoric through this lens, we seek to open the 'black box' of politico-strategic crisis management (rather than its operational management, which is the focus of the bulk of existing research on emergencies and crises).

In formal terms, the ultimate explanandum of the study of the rhetoric of crisis exploitation is twofold: the nature and depth of changes in political support for key public office-holders and/or agencies; and the nature and degree of policy change in the wake of an emergency/disturbance. [3] Its triggering condition is the occurrence of non-routine, disruptive incidents or trends: the cascade of

'bad news' about the state of US financial institutions, the housing markets and its national economy, eventually spilling over into financial institutions and macroeconomic indicators worldwide. The focus of our analytical attention, however, lies with what happens in between; how these adverse events are 'framed' (that is, given meaning) by key public leaders.

2. Dissecting framing contests

To a considerable extent, emergencies, economic downturns and other forms of social crisis are all in the eye of the beholder. Following the classic Thomas theorem ('if men define their situations as real, they are real in their consequences'), it is not the events on the ground, but their public perception and interpretation that determine their potential impact on political office-holders and public policy. As many have remarked in the context of the emerging recession: much of it has evolved from perceptual, psychological factors such as confidence, trust and fear. Accordingly, we define crises as events or developments widely perceived by members of relevant communities to constitute urgent threats to core community values and structures. Notwithstanding that, it is essential to note no set of events or developments is likely to be perceived entirely uniformly by the members of a community. Perceptions of crisis are likely to vary not just among communities—societies experience different types of disturbances and have different types and levels of vulnerability and resilience—but within them, reflecting the different biases of stakeholders as a result of their different values, positions and responsibilities. These differential perceptions and indeed accounts of a crisis constitute the stuff of crisis exploitation, as will be detailed below.

Figure 2.1 offers a stylised representation of the constructed nature of 'crises'. Actors confronted with the same situation (for example, an earthquake, a case of collective corruption in the public service, a shooting spree or a child dying of parental abuse) might adopt fundamentally different types of frames. We distinguish here between three types.

- Type-1. Business-as-usual frame: denial that the events in question represent more than an *unfortunate incident*, and thus a predisposition to downplay the idea that they should have any political or policy repercussions whatsoever.
- Type-2. Crisis as threat frame: deeming the events to be a *critical threat* to the collective good embodied in the status quo before these events came to light, and thus a predisposition to defend the agents (incumbent office-holders) and tools (existing policies and organisational practices) of that status quo against criticism.
- Type-3. Crisis as opportunity frame: deeming the events to be a *critical opportunity* to expose deficiencies in the status quo ex ante, and hence a

predisposition to pinpoint blameworthy behaviour by status quo agents and dysfunctional policies and organisations in order to mobilise support for their removal or substantive alteration.

Figure 2.1 Severity and causality: the first two crisis-framing contests
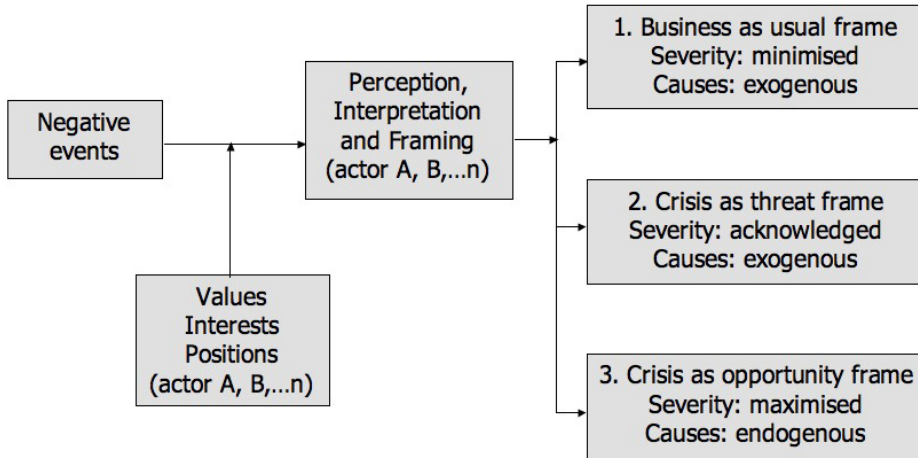
Not so long ago, type-1 or type-2 representations of incidents and disasters were likely to dominate and scholarly interest focused on the 'solidarity impulses' and 'altruistic communities' these events tended to generate (Barton 1969). Most disasters entered collective memory as an 'act of God', defying explanation, redress and guilt (Rosenthal 1998). They were treated as incomprehensible events that tested and defeated available administrative and political repertoires of prevention and response. After these events, which few people (if any) were able to fathom (let alone plan for), bewilderment and sorrow gave rise to an urgent need to move on and rebuild a state of order (see, for instance, Rozario 2005).

Even natural disaster experts agree that times have changed (Quarantelli 1998; Steinberg 2000; Quarantelli and Perry 2005). In today's risk society, disasters typically evoke nagging questions that spell trouble for incumbent leaders: why did they not see this coming? We have seen this before, so why did they not know what to do this time? Almost invariably, post-mortem activities bring to light that there had been multiple, albeit scattered and sometimes ambiguous hunches, signals and warnings about growing vulnerabilities and threats along the lines of the scenario that actually transpired. These were evidently not acted on effectively, and much of the political controversy in the aftermath of the once 'incomprehensible' crisis focuses on the question of why no action was taken. So type-3 ways of perceiving and framing the events have gained potential currency.

The first framing contest: severity—ripple or crisis?

Figure 2.1 presents two of four types of framing contests that occur in the event of any set of unscheduled, negative events. The first contest centres on the *significance* of the events: are they within or outside the community's 'zone of indifference' (Barnard 1938; cf. Romzek and Dubnick 1987) and its standard collective coping repertoires? Are they both 'big' and 'bad' for the community at hand (for example, the Al Gore view of climate change); bad but not really big (the nuclear industry's view of the nuclear-waste problem); only big but not really all that bad (the *Stern Report* view of global warming); or neither (the Dutch view of recreational soft drug consumption)? At stake in this significance contest is the agenda status of the issues raised by the events: will they be seen as top priority (however temporary that might turn out to be) or can they be ignored altogether or dealt with in routine, piecemeal fashion?

Clearly, proponents of type-1 frames argue to *minimise* event significance, proponents of type-2 frames are more likely to *acknowledge* event significance and proponents of type-3 frames are most likely to *maximise* event significance. The political risk of adhering to a type-1 frame is to be accused of 'blindness', 'passivity' and 'rigidity'; the political risk of type-3 frames is to come across as 'alarmist' or 'opportunistic'. Both can be accused of being divorced from reality, if not of outright lying. Equally clearly, a true sense of crisis can be said to exist in a political and policy sense only when there are sufficiently credible, audible voices and seemingly self-evident facts and images underpinning the idea that what is going on is indeed *big*, *bad* and moreover *urgent* (Rosenthal et al. 1989). If this is not the case, denials or otherwise comparatively benign and complacent definitions of the situation are likely to prevail.

Crisis framing in cases other than major disasters, huge outbursts of violence and the like is therefore a political challenge of considerable magnitude. Many unscheduled events and latent risks are fundamentally ambiguous, leaving considerable space for type-1 denials. Companies that see their share prices fall have no reason to claim that these depreciations reflect underlying problems in corporate strategy and/or management. In fact, many big companies as well as public organisations are on record as systematically neglecting and genuinely underestimating their own latent vulnerabilities (Slatter 1984; Mitroff and Pauchant 1990; Turner and Pidgeon 1997).

Take an example. A director of a child protection agency will not self-evidently treat the violent death of one of her agency's young clients as a major event. In her business, child-protection professionals have to live with the reality that not every endangered child can be saved. Even if two die within one week, this could still be explained away as a statistical aberration—as coincidence. There is a point, however, at which a type-1 reaction, however well entrenched, becomes cognitively or politically unsustainable—for example, if an unusually

high number of children die in a given short time, or even if only one child dies in particularly gruesome circumstances, or if reports emerge about one hitherto unnoticed fatality that contain facts or allegations compromising the child protection agency's performance of its custodial role.

This tipping point, however, is never fixed or readily recognisable, because it is a function of a constellation of variable situational, historical, cultural and political forces (cf. Axelrod and Cohen 2000). Rosenthal (1988) has captured the only generalisation that might apply, arguing that the greater the sense of invulnerability in a society, the more likely it is that relatively minor disturbances will have major destabilising effects. In contrast, societies with a well-developed 'disaster subculture' or organisations with a resilient 'safety culture' have learned to live with adversity and have developed cultural and organisational coping resources.

In instances where denial is no longer a credible option, debates about responsibility, blame and policy implications take a different turn depending on which causal story about the nature and genesis of unscheduled events comes to prevail: the type-2 notion of well-meaning policymakers not being informed of looming vulnerabilities and threats (in which case blame goes down the hierarchy and outside the organisation); or the type-1 notion of senior executives unwilling to address the growing risk brought to their attention (in which case blame attribution moves upward and to the centre). The same applies to cases where the official response to a clearly exogenous incident or development is widely perceived as being slow, disorganised or insensitive to the needs of the stricken community.

For example, after Hurricane Katrina, the US Federal Emergency Management Agency and the White House took a terrible public beating—not so much because they had failed to prevent the levee break (although the Federal Government was certainly blamed by state and local authorities for having long neglected the flood defences in the region), but primarily because the disaster evoked an image of total disarray at the very heart of the government's much vaunted post-9/11 crisis-management machinery (cf. Garnett and Kouzmin 2007). Likewise, its tardy and seemingly indifferent response to the fate of thousands of its citizens victimised by the 2004 tsunami created political problems for the Swedish cabinet (Brändström et al. 2008). An official investigation revealed clear evidence that the need to build and maintain crisis-response capacity at the cabinet level had not been given the priority it deserved. Moreover, clumsy attempts by the prime minister and the foreign minister to deflect blame for the slow response compounded their problems. Not only did they fail to instigate quick and effective crisis operations, their limited grasp of the symbolic dimensions of the tsunami predicament was painfully exposed.

The second framing contest: causality—incident or symptom?

When type-1 crisis denial is not or no longer an option, the main emphasis in the framing contest centres on causality: who or what drives the course of events? At stake in the causality contest are the political fortunes of office-holders and their challengers, as well as the future of the current and existing set of policies, programs and organisations in the domain in which the crisis has materialised.

In their study of policy fiascos, Bovens and 't Hart (1996:129) argue that 'to explain is to blame'. As Figure 2.1 shows, type-3 causal frames that emphasise factors deemed to be foreseeable and controllable by a particular set of policymakers serve to 'endogenise' accountability; such frames focus blame on identifiable individuals and the policies they embody. Type-1/2 frames that 'exogenise' accountability serve to get policymakers 'off the hook' and leave the fundamental premises of existing policies in tact. These frames typically refer to forces of nature or 'out-groups' of various kinds (Islamic radicals; hard-core 'anarchists' in otherwise peaceful protest movements; greedy or fraudulent corporate managers; human errors of technical designers or low-level operators). They point to either unforeseeability (the Indian Ocean tsunami from the perspective of state and local officials in Indonesia, Thailand or Sri Lanka) or uncontrollability (an economic recession allegedly brought about by a global slump pervading an otherwise well-managed national economy). In the latter case, for example, some might argue that the central bank did not loosen monetary policy soon enough or that the government was complacent in riding a boom period based on a limited and therefore vulnerable mix of export assets. More often than not, however, they provide enough loopholes for blame diffusion across the 'many hands' that usually make up complex contemporary governance arrangements (Bovens 1998).

The third framing contest: the political game—blameworthy or not?

In the third framing contest (Table 2.1) the crucial issue at stake is where blame for the occurrence or escalation of the crisis lands. Anti-establishment actors—for example, opposition leaders, advocacy groups, but potentially also newly incumbent executive office-holders themselves—will have to decide whether they can convincingly blame (past) incumbents. If they find they have a case to make, they will have to decide whether they want to use it to call for sanctions against those office-holders or whether to stop short of that and merely use the crisis to undermine their authority by damaging their reputations. In contrast, (past or incumbent) office-holders must choose between rejecting, deflecting or diffusing responsibility for the crisis or accepting it wholly or partially. As said, newly incumbent leaders, such as some of the heads of government to be discussed in the case study chapters in this volume, can try and pinpoint blame

on their predecessors. Blame deflection occurs when leader rhetoric points to exogenous factors ('market forces') or failures of subordinates (that is, the public service). Blame diffusion is the logical outcome of a 'many hands' argument: if people are persuaded that the causes of the crisis are multiple and complex then blaming a single leader or a small subset of leaders feels arbitrary. Such arguments seek to substitute a 'forensic' logic of responsibility for the 'political' logic of responsibility that can be found in doctrines of collective or ministerial responsibility. If the many-hands view prevails, the buck stops nowhere.

Critics Incumbents	Absolve blame	Focus blame
Accept responsibility	I. Blame minimisation: elite escape likely	II. Blame acceptance: elite damage likely
Deny responsibility	III. Blame avoidance: elite escape likely	IV. Blame showdown: elite damage, escape, rejuvenation all possible

Table 2.1 Who's to blame? The third crisis-framing contest

Table 2.1 depicts this third framing contest as a simple game matrix, juxtaposing the strategic choices office-holders and their critics will encounter in the politics of the post-crisis phase. It predicts the outcomes of the debate about accountability and blame that follows from particular configurations of political strategies.

All other things being equal, box II is the clearly preferred outcome for anti-establishment forces. They will, however, have to consider that the likelihood of incumbents simply absorbing responsibility for crises appears to be small. So they have to weigh the odds in the lower half of the figure. They can stop short of seeking wholesale removal of office-holders and push for a tactical victory (box III), but at the risk of ending up in their least favourable box I: letting the government off the hook entirely (this happens when incumbents opt for pre-emptive blame absorption and get away with ritual promises to do better next time around). Box IV depicts an indeterminate scenario, which is most likely to evolve into a protracted and intensely politicised process of crisis investigation, reinvestigation, spin and counter-spin. It is impossible to tell who will prevail in such a—potentially epic—struggle.

The calculus for (long) incumbent office-holders involves a similar political trade-off: fighting to come away unscathed (or even gain credit, for example, for allegedly wise or heroic crisis-response leadership) or pragmatically accepting whole or partial responsibility for alleged errors of omission or commission in the run-up to the crisis or during the response to it. If we assume government leaders first and foremost value their own political survival, boxes I and III are clearly their preferred outcome. They too, however, have to consider the

likelihood of their opponents assuming the conciliatory posture that these two boxes presuppose. Depending on their assessment of the opposition's determination and ability to inflict major damage on them, they might consider proactively accepting responsibility and come out looking strong, fair and self-reflective. If, however, they make the much more likely assessment that the opposition is going to scream and holler, they are better off opting for a blame-avoidance strategy, if only to avoid their worst-case scenario (box II). They could still lose at the end of the protracted blame struggle that is then most likely to ensue (box IV). As incumbent government, however, they might have confidence in their heresthetic abilities (cf. Riker 1986) to manipulate (delay, speed up, displace, reframe) 'diversionary' mechanisms such as crisis inquiries. In sum, this matrix exercise suggests that, *ceteris paribus*, box IV is the most likely battleground where the third framing contest will end up.

The fourth framing contest: the policy game—maintain or change policy commitments?

The final part of crisis framing focuses on the lessons to be learned from the crisis of the day: does the crisis suggest that 'the system' (that is, the existing cluster of public policy beliefs, institutions and programs) is broken beyond repair or is essentially sound and merely needs some fixing up at the edges? Table 2.2 depicts the structure of the main conflicts over policy that crises induce. The key struggle here is between status quo and change-oriented players. Aspiring reformers can exploit crises rhetorically to engage in what Schumpeter called 'creative destruction': discrediting and deconstructing the status quo and proposing an alternative set of ideas and commitments. Reformers have to decide whether they feel the crisis of the day offers them the opportunity, through crisis rhetoric, to press persuasively for a wholesale overturning of the policy's ideological and/or intellectual underpinnings (Hall 1993), or whether to momentarily content themselves with advocating more incremental changes. For example, the bid by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (2009; see further Chapter 9, this volume), in a much-debated essay he wrote about the global financial crisis in early 2009 was to nudge the Australian public debate towards a paradigm shift, encompassing not one particular area of public policy but rather an entire philosophy of governance.

Status quo players have to gauge the degree of destabilisation and de-legitimisation of existing policies that the crisis narratives floating around have evoked among experts, stakeholders and the mass public alike. Based on that assessment, they might ask themselves whether they have the arguments and the clout to openly resist any change of policy advocated by inquiries or change advocates or whether some form of accommodating gesture ('learning the lessons') is necessary. In the case of the Rudd essay, two Liberal leaders (an aspiring prime minister and a former treasurer) who publicly responded to the

essay Malcolm Turnbull (2009) and Peter Costello (*Lateline* 2009), decided that Rudd's case for paradigm change could be demolished, since both their responses flatly denied the need for a fundamental change of course.

That is nothing unusual. As Hall (1993) and Sabatier (1999) have argued, policymakers who have been instrumental in creating a particular status quo might be well prepared to change their beliefs and practices with regard to technical, instrumental, 'non-core' aspects of a policy, but they are much less likely to 'surrender' their core beliefs—for example, the heart of the policy paradigm.

Change advocates Status quo players	Press for policy paradigm shift	Press for incremental reform
Resist policy change	I. Policy stalemate or majority-imposed paradigm shift	II. Policy stalemate or majority-imposed incremental adjustment
Contain policy change	III. Major and swift symbolic gestures; incremental substantive policy change	IV. Negotiated incremental adjustment

Table 2.2 Maintain or change policy? The fourth crisis-framing contest

Depending on these two sets of actors' calculations and the power balance that emerges between them in the course of the crisis episode, the fourth framing contest can take different forms. When both parties play hardball, a protracted stalemate or a major paradigm shift is most likely, depending on each party's ability to form a winning coalition (box I). Incremental change is, not surprisingly, the most likely outcome in most of the other configurations. There are, however, important nuances between them that might bear on the long-term stability of the outcome: a set of incremental adjustments that is imposed by a more powerful change coalition (box II) is less likely to persist than a negotiated package between parties both of whom are prepared to settle pragmatically (box IV). In box III, the way out of a potential conundrum is found in an inherently unstable mixture of rhetoric and symbols suggesting major shifts (to placate change advocates) and a reality of much less far-reaching substantive changes (to satisfy the status quo players).

3. Crisis rhetoric and framing contests in the media arena

The mass media plays a crucial role in reporting elites' crisis rhetoric (cf. Seeger et al. 2003; Ulmer et al. 2007). The media is not just a backdrop against which crisis actors operate, it constitutes a prime arena in which incumbents and critics, status quo players and change advocates have to 'perform' to obtain or preserve

political clout. Leaders need to convince news-makers to pay attention to their particular crisis frame and, if possible, support it.

Prior research (Boin et al. 2008, 2009) suggests that—as Edelman (1977) predicted—incumbent elites can be quite effective at 'selling' their frame to the media. They also show, however, that office-holders can fail miserably in this regard or succumb under the pressure of suitably dramatised counter-frames advanced by well-organised oppositional coalitions. The most interesting example of this contrast is US President Bush's differential framing performance during the aftermaths of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. During the first, Bush succeeded magnificently (in hindsight, many would argue he succeeded all too well, making any criticisms of his 'war on terrorism' seem unpatriotic), but he lost badly after Katrina hit Louisiana and Mississippi (Preston 2008; 't Hart et al. 2009). Note that in the former, Bush took the stance of a change advocate, whereas in the latter he acted as a status quo player.

Another interesting case was the fight between Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Aznar and opposition leader José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, who tried to impose their diametrically opposing views of the causes of the 2004 Madrid bombings on the Spanish public, which was readying itself to vote several days later. Again, the status quo player lost; the change advocate won. Aznar lost (while leading in the polls up to the day of the bombings), mostly because he could not convince the public that Basque separatists had perpetrated the bombings and consequently was open to charges of deliberately misleading the public as to the real—to him, politically inconvenient—culprit, namely, al-Qaeda (Olmeda 2008).

The crisis communication literature argues that a proactive, professional media performance enhances an actor's credibility; reactive and disorganised crisis communication can do the reverse (Seeger et al. 2003; Fearn-Banks 2007). Lying, understating or denying obvious problems, and promising relief without delivering, undermine an actor's credibility (Boin et al. 2005). In this perspective, the degree to which the media's crisis reporting and commentary align with the frames put forward by a particular political actor depends on the credibility of that actor's crisis communication.

The rival interpretation is that the media pursues its own agenda in crisis reporting (see, for instance, Streitmatter 1997) and that the crisis communication performance by any of the actors matters less than the degree to which their rhetoric fits with the pre-existing biases of the main media outlets. The content analysis of media coverage in three countries (Finland, Norway and Sweden) that saw their nationals victimised by the Indian Ocean tsunami provides some support for the idea that the selection and tone of media reporting can also matter (Brändström et al. 2008). It appears especially relevant how willing the media is to apportion blame directly to individual office-holders, even if the direct causes

are (in this case quite literally) far removed from them (Hearit 2006). The more the media's crisis reporting and commentary emphasise exogenous interpretations of a crisis, the less likely it is that government actors will suffer negative political consequences in its aftermath; the more it emphasises endogenous ones, the more likely it is that they will.

4. Studying framing contests during the economic meltdown: design and methods

So far, we have argued that skilful office-holders can manage to politically 'contain' crises and thereby insulate themselves and their colleagues from sanctions and reputation losses. Likewise, skilful status quo players can weather the storm of deinstitutionalisation that crisis inquiries unleash on existing polices and institutions and effectively protect their policy commitments from pressures for radical change. Oppositional forces, however, sometimes successfully attempt to politicise crises in their efforts to weaken or remove their office-holding rivals. Finally, change advocates might manage to exploit crises to discredit and dismantle well-entrenched policies and institutions.

In the chapters that follow, we track leader rhetoric and media responses to that rhetoric during the unfolding of the global economic meltdown, up to April 2009. We aim to detect if and when the kind of framing contests depicted here occurred in each of the nine jurisdictions studied here. We focus in particular on the verbal behaviour of three key managers of the national economy: the head of government, the minister of finance (or treasurer) and the president of the central bank. Specifically, we aim to answer the following questions:

- How, in their key speech acts, did each of the three actors name (severity), explain (causality), account for (responsibility/blame) and propose to manage (policy) the national manifestations of the global economic meltdown?
- How did these framing attempts evolve over time in response to the cascading events of the meltdown worldwide and nationally?
- To what extent were the meaning-making efforts of these three actors consistent with one another?
- To what extent did these framing efforts 'succeed' in terms of eliciting media support for their claims about the severity and causes of the crisis, for their own handling of the crisis and for their proposed policy stances going into the future?

In each case study, the author:

- reconstructed the local chronology of the economic meltdown in the period between late 2007 and March 2009 (with different local emphases as appropriate): key events, key government decisions, key public debates/controversies.

- studied the broader political context in the country to understand the backdrop against which key political actors operated, and took into account in their approach to the global economic meltdown—for instance, in Canada, New Zealand and the United States, the study period coincided with parliamentary or presidential elections; in the latter two, the crisis became a key election issue, and in both of them political transitions ensued.
- identified and analysed two to four key speech acts of the head of government, finance minister and national bank's president—for example, in parliament, direct addresses, press conferences and interviews or public lectures to key stakeholder audiences (the individual chapters will account for the selection of the speeches). The qualitative content analyses were aimed at tracing the speaker's claims regarding severity, causality, responsibility/blame and policy. Each speech was coded in a qualitative coding grid. The full extent of the coding work can be found in the online appendix at <http://globalfinancialcrisis.wetpaint.com/>.
- content analysed three major newspapers for their coverage and commentary regarding each speech act, categorising articles in terms of (implicitly or explicitly) supportive, neutral or critical, on each of the four critical dimensions of rhetoric discerned above (the individual chapters will account for the selection of newspapers used).
- finally, for each actor, the evolution of their rhetoric (through the series of speech acts) as well as the evolution of public responses to their speech acts were tracked.

The case studies were performed following the method of structured, focused comparison advocated by George and Bennett (2005). Data gathering and analysis were guided by a joint analytical protocol. In addition to the national case studies, we invited separate studies of the crisis rhetoric of the European Union's leaders (the President of the European Commission, the Finance Commissioner and the President of the European Central Bank), a comparative piece on the crisis rhetoric of opposition leaders and a series of short responses to the case study findings by senior scholars in the fields of leadership, crisis management and political communication. All these chapters can be found in Part V.

As pointed out in Chapter 1, this study does not aspire to be the definitive account of crisis management (or even crisis rhetoric) during the global financial crisis. As a form of 'quick-response research', it has limited scope in the time, numbers of actors and speeches and the types of mass media covered. Its limited depth cannot compete with the methodological rigour of Wood's (2007) comprehensive study of the economic rhetoric of US presidents. Having said that, our study looks at more than just presidents and other heads of government, which opens up analytical issues and possibilities not covered by Wood. Finally, our study does not fully cover all components of the crisis-exploitation framework

sketched above, since it focuses exclusively on the rhetoric of incumbent elites (and its reception by the media and the public). A fully rounded crisis-exploitation analysis needs three further components: a) systematic analysis of opposition and other non-executive leaders' rhetoric; b) an analysis of the interaction between government and oppositional forces in the third and fourth framing contests applying the game matrices presented in Tables 2.1 and 2.2; and c) a systematic assessment of the political and policy outcomes of the crises studied. The last is impossible to do given that the crisis is continuing at the time of writing. The other two tasks were beyond the scope of the present study.

Having said all that, we are confident that this study presents a worthwhile 'first stab' at studying crisis leadership in what will surely become one of the most intensely scrutinised episodes of modern world history. In the final chapter of this volume, we shall compare the case study findings and interpret the patterns of similarities and difference in crisis framing that emerge from this comparison. We shall furthermore review the perspectives offered by the thematic chapters and the expert essays. All of this will feed into a set of—necessarily preliminary—conclusions about the possibilities and limits of crisis rhetoric in shaping politics and public policy.

References

Alink, F., Boin, A. and 't Hart, P. 2001, 'Institutional crises and reforms in policy sectors: the case of refugee policy in Europe', *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 286–306.

Axelrod, R. and Cohen, M. D. 2000, *Harnessing Complexity: Organizational implications of a scientific frontier*, Free Press, New York.

Barnard, C. I. 1938, *The Functions of the Executive*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.

Barrett, W. and Collins, D. 2006, *Grand Illusion: The untold story of Rudy Giuliani and 9/11*, HarperCollins, New York.

Barton, A. 1969, *Communities in Disaster: A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations,* Doubleday and Company, New York, pp. 203-79.

Baumgartner, F. R. and Jones, B. D. 1993, *Agendas and Instability in American Politics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Baumgartner, F. R. and Jones, B. D. (eds) 2002, *Policy Dynamics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Birkland, T. A. 1997, *After Disaster: Agenda setting, public policy and focusing events*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC.

Birkland, T. A. 2006, *Lessons of Disaster: Policy change after catastrophic events*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC.

Boin, A. and 't Hart, P. 2003, 'Public leadership in times of crisis: mission impossible?', *Public Administration Review*, vol. 63, no. 5, pp. 544–53.

Boin, A., 't Hart, P., Stern, E. and Sundelius, B. 2005, *The Politics of Crisis Management: Public leadership under pressure*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Boin, A., McConnell, A. and 't Hart, P. (eds) 2008, *Governing After Crisis: The politics of investigation, accountability and learning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Boin, A., McConnell, A. and 't Hart, P. 2009, 'Crisis exploitation: political and policy impacts of framing contests', *Journal of European Public Policy*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 81–106.

Bovens, M. 1998, *The Quest for Responsibility: Accountability and citizenship in complex organizations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bovens, M. and 't Hart, P. 1996, *Understanding Policy Fiascos*, Transaction, New Brunswick.

Bovens, M., Peters, B. G. and 't Hart, P. (eds) 2001, *Success and Failure in Pubic Governance: A comparative analysis*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.

Brändström, A. and Kuipers, S. 2003, 'From "normal incidents" to political crises: understanding the selective politicization of policy failures', *Government and Opposition*, vol. 38, no. 3, pp. 279–305.

Brändström, A., Kuipers, S. and Daleus, P. 2008, 'The politics of tsunami responses: comparing patterns of blame management in Scandinavia', in A. Boin, A. McConnell and P. 't Hart (eds), *Governing After Crisis: The politics of investigation, accountability and learning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 114–47.

De Vries, M. 2004, 'Framing crises: response patterns to explosions in fireworks factories', *Administration and Society*, vol. 36, no. 5, pp. 594–614.

Drennan, L. T. and McConnell, A. 2007, *Risk and Crisis Management in the Public Sector*, Routledge, Abingdon.

Edelman, M. 1977, *Political Language: Words that succeed and policies that fail*, Academic Press, New York.

Ellis, R. J. 1994, *Presidential Lightning Rods: The politics of blame avoidance*, University of Kansas Press, Lawrence, Kans.

Entman, R. 1993, 'Framing: toward clarification of a fractured paradigm', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 51–8.

Fearn-Banks, K. 2007, *Crisis Communications: A case book approach*, 3rd edition, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwaw, NJ.

Garnett, J. L. and Kouzmin, A. 2007, 'Communicating throughout Katrina: competing and complementary conceptual lenses on crisis communication', *Public Administration Review*, vol. 67, no. 1, pp. 171–88.

George, A. L. and Bennett, A. 2005, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, The MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.

Hall, P. A. 1993, 'Policy paradigms, social learning and the state: the case of economic policymaking in Britain', *Comparative Politics*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 275–96.

't Hart, P. 1993, 'Symbols, rituals and power: the lost dimensions of crisis management', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 36–50.

't Hart, P. and Boin, A. 2001, 'Between crisis and normalcy: the long shadow of post-crisis politics', in U. Rosenthal, A. Boin and L. K. Comfort (eds), *Managing Crises: Threats, challenges, opportunities*, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, pp. 28–46.

't Hart, P., Tindall, K. and Brown, C. 2009, 'Crisis leadership of the Bush presidency: advisory capacity and presidential performance in the acute stages of the 9/11 and Katrina crises', *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 3, pp. 472–91.

Hay, C. 2002, *Political Analysis*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Hearit, K. M. 2006, *Crisis Management by Apology*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.

Heyse, L., Resodihardjo, S., Lantink, T. and Lettinga, B. (eds) 2006, *Reform in Europe: Breaking the barriers in government*, Ashgate, Aldershot.

Hood, C., Jennings, W., Hogwood, B. and Beeston, C. 2007, *Fighting fires in testing times: exploring a staged response hypothesis for blame management in two exam fiasco cases*, CARR Discussion Paper 42, Centre for Analysis of Risk and Regulation, London School of Economics, London.

Howarth, D., Norval, A. J. and Stavrakakis, Y. (eds) 2000, *Discourse Theory and Political Analysis: Identities, hegemonies and social change*, Manchester University Press, Manchester.

Jones, B. D. and Baumgartner, F. R. 2005, *The Politics of Attention: How government prioritizes problems*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Kay, A. 2006, *The Dynamics of Public Policy*, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham.

Keeler, J. 1993, 'Opening the window for reform: mandates, crises, and extraordinary policy-making', *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 433–86.

Kingdon, J. 2003, *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, 2nd edition, Longman, New York.

Klein, N. 2007, *The Shock Doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*, Metropolitan Books, New York.

Kuipers, S. 2006, *The Crisis Imperative: Crisis rhetoric and welfare state reform in Belgium and the Netherlands in the early 1990s*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam.

Lateline 2009, 'Transcript: Peter Costello joins *Lateline*', *Lateline* ABC TV, 3 February.

Lodge, M. and Hood, C. 2002, 'Pavlovian policy responses to media feeding frenzies? Dangerous dogs regulation in comparative perspective', *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 1–13.

Lomborg, B. (ed.) 2004, *Global Crises, Global Solutions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Mitroff, I. I. and Pauchant, T. C. 1990, *We're so Big and Powerful that Nothing Bad Can Happen to Us*, Carol Publishing, New York.

Mumford, L. 1934, *Technics and Civilization*, Harcourt Brace, New York.

Olmeda, J. 2008, 'A reversal of fortune: blame games and framing contests after the 3/11 terrorist attacks in Madrid', in A. Boin, A. McConnell and P. 't Hart (eds), *Governing After Crisis: The politics of investigation, accountability and learning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 62–84.

Parker, C. F. and Dekker, S. 2008, 'September 11 and post-crisis investigation: exploring the role and impact of the 9/11 Commission', in A. Boin, A. McConnell and P. 't Hart (eds), *Governing After Crisis: The politics of investigation, accountability and learning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 255–84.

Posner, R. A. 2004, *Catastrophe: Risk and response*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Preston, T. 2008, 'Weathering the politics of responsibility and blame: the Bush administration and its response to Hurricane Katrina', in A. Boin, A. McConnell and P. 't Hart (eds) *Governing After Crisis: the politics of investigation, accountability and learning, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge*, pp. 33-61.

Primo, D. M. and Cobb, R. W. 2003, *The Plane Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington, DC.

Quarantelli, E. L. (ed.) 1998, *What is a Disaster? Perspectives on the question*, Routledge, London.

Quarantelli, E. L. and R. W. Perry (eds) 2005, *What is a Disaster? New answers to old questions*, Xlibris Press, Philadelphia.

Resodihardjo, S. 2006, *Crisis and Change: Understanding crisis-reform processes in Dutch and British prison services*, Free University, Amsterdam.

Riker, W. H. 1986, *The Art of Political Manipulation*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Romzek, B. S. and Dubnick, M. J. 1987, 'Accountability in the public sector: lessons from the challenger tragedy', *Public Administration Review,* vol. 47, no. 3, pp. 227–38.

Rose, R. and Davies, P. 1994, *Inheritance in Public Policy: Change without choice in Britain*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Rosenthal, U. 1988, 'The vulnerability of the city', in L. J. Roborgh, R. Stough and A. J. Toonen (eds), *Public Infrastructure Revisited*, Indiana University Press, Ind., pp. 1–21.

Rosenthal, U. 1998, 'Future disasters, future definitions', in E. L. Quarantelli (ed.), *What is a Disaster: Perspectives on the question*, Routledge, London, pp. 146–60.

Rosenthal, U., Charles, M. T. and 't Hart, P. (eds) 1989, *Coping with Crisis: The management of disasters, riots and terrorism*, Charles C. Thomas, Springfield.

Rozario, K. 2005, 'Making progress: disaster narratives and the art of optimism in modern America', in L. J. Vale and T. J. Campanella (eds), *The Resilient City: How modern cities recover from disaster*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 27–54.

Rudd, K. 2009, 'Essay: The global financial crisis', *The Monthly*, February, pp. 26–38.

Sabatier, P. A. (ed.) 1999, *Theories of the Policy Process*, Westview Press, Boulder.

Scharpf, F. 1997, *Games Real Actors Play*, Westview Press, Boulder.

Seeger, M. W., Sellnow, T. L. and Ulmer, R. R. 2003, *Communication and Organizational Crisis*, Praeger, Westport.

Slatter, S. 1984, *Corporate Recovery: Successful turnaround strategies and their implementation*, Penguin Books, London.

Snider, L. 2004, 'Resisting neo-liberalism: the poisoned water disaster in Walkerton Ontario', *Socio & Legal Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 265–89.

Steinberg, T. 2000, *Acts of God: The history of unnatural disasters in America*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Stone, D. 2001, *Policy Paradox: The art of political decision making*, 2nd edition, W. W. Norton & Company, New York.

Streitmatter, R. 1997, *Mightier than the Sword: How the news media have shaped American history*, Westview Press, Boulder.

Tarrow S. 1994, *Power in Movement*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Thelen, K. 2004, *How Institutions Evolve: The political economy of skills in Germany, Britain, the United States, and Japan*, Cambridge University Press, New York.

Turnbull, M. 2009, 'PM's cheap money shot', *The Australian*, 7 March 2009, viewed 10 June 2009, <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,25148674-7583,00.html>

Turner, B. A. and Pidgeon, N. 1997, *Man-Made Disasters*, 2nd edition, Butterworth Heinemann, London.

Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L. and Seeker, M. W. 2007, *Effective Crisis Communication: Moving from crisis to opportunity*, Sage, Thousand Oaks, Calif.

Wagner-Pacifici, R. 1986, *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as social drama*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Wagner-Pacifici, R. 1994, *Discourse and Destruction: The City of Philadelphia versus MOVE*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Wilkins, L. 1987, *Shared Vulnerability: The media and American perceptions of the Bhopal disaster*, Greenwood Press, New York.

Wilkins, L., Walters, T. and Walters, L. M. (eds) 1989, *Bad Tidings: Communication and catastrophe*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.

Wolf, N. 2007, *The End of America: Letter of warning to a young patriot*, Scribe, Melbourne.

Wood, B. D. 2007, *The Politics of Economic Leadership: The causes and consequences of presidential rhetoric*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Endnotes

[1] This chapter is based on Boin et al. (2009), but is significantly abridged, adapted and expanded on here.

[2] Our notion of frames follows that of Entman (1993:52), who argues that 'to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation'.

[3] These dimensions can be tightly connected, as when the political demise of key office-holders removes the main champion of a particular policy from the political scene. In many cases, however, the 'programmatic' (policy-focused) and 'political' (office-holders-focused) dimensions of policy evaluation and political accountability episodes appear to be completely unrelated. See Bovens et al. (2001).

Part II. One crisis, different worlds: the United States and Canada